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Writing British national history in the twentieth century

Salinsky, Mary

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**WRITING BRITISH NATIONAL HISTORY IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Mary Ruth Salinsky

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

King's College

University of London

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Ruth and George Fasnacht,
from whom I learnt to love history

WRITING BRITISH NATIONAL HISTORY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

ABSTRACT

Popular accounts of British history written around 1900 are very different from those written around 2000. There is no comprehensive study of the nature of this change. The popular narrative of England/Britain has been shaped by the nation's role in the world, by contemporary historiographical approaches, and the different ways the British have thought about themselves and their nation. Popular, single author comprehensive syntheses of national history reveal assumptions about the character of the nation and the sort of stories that could convincingly be written about it at different times. These works are examined along with interviews of surviving historians and an examination of personal papers and publishers' archives where possible.

Under the impact of war, decolonisation, British nationalisms, the rise of social history and a new self-consciousness in historiography British history has become less Anglo-centric and the Empire is no longer central to the narrative. Historians integrated social and economic history more into their accounts. They were writing narratives that were more tentative, making the existence of multiple stories more explicit, providing more interpretation and attention to the significance of events. The accounts were less masculine but not much less white. Authors of popular British history were still predominantly white Oxbridge educated men. At the end of the century historians wrote livelier histories that were beginning to exploit media other than print. The narrative was less confident in its conclusion, but historians still asserted their belief in the value of British national history.

WRITING BRITISH NATIONAL HISTORY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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CHRONOLOGICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF POPULAR HISTORIES OF BRITAIN PUBLISHED 1900-2002

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1940-49

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1950-69

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INTRODUCTION

‘ “A History of Histories” can and should be more than a record of the achievements, strengths and weaknesses of historians and the schools and traditions to which they belonged. It is itself a historical enterprise, one of the ways in which we attempt to understand the past.’

John Burrow

A History of Histories (Penguin 2009, xix)

There is no account of how the history of England/Britain written for a popular audience has changed over the last one hundred years. Yet the history of our nation is highly contested. It is seen as essential for an understanding of what the nation is, how its interests are defined and what policy choices are open. How national history is taught in schools is the subject of continuing unresolved debate. The historiography of England/Britain has significance for historical practice, for domestic politics and for the nation’s international position. Awareness of Britain as a multi-national state now informs all writing about British history; no historian now uses the terms ‘England’ and ‘Britain’ interchangeably as was once common, or uses ‘England’ to stand for Britain as A J P Taylor did. A greater measure of devolution has begun to make England more conscious of its separate identity, as seen in debates about a possible English parliament and the now common use of the St George flag at England sporting events. But in accounts of national history, the decision to write only about England now needs to be explained and defended, as Simon Jenkins found necessary.¹ Limiting the national history thus would have seemed unremarkable a hundred years ago. Domestically, the future of the United Kingdom continues to attract debate about how long it might last in its present form, how far devolution will go, and whether Scotland might become independent. And internationally, the relationship of the UK with the EU has become more contested, and the UK’s ability to become influential in foreign affairs has diminished.

The answers given to these questions depends on the view taken about what sort of nation Britain is; what sort of people the British are. And the answer to those questions depends very largely on the story that is told about its origins and development, its history. Knowledge of national history has long been viewed as essential for an informed citizenry and for political decision makers. Historians wrote big books on English history at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries for that reason, and it has continued to be a motive.

¹ Simon Jenkins, *A Short History of England* (Profile Books 2011), 9

Scope

This is a study of the way the history of England/Britain has been told over the past hundred years. While some have commented on the general history of historiography in the twentieth century (Mandler, Burrow, Parker, Cannadine) and others have included discussions as part of wider cultural and social histories (Raphael Samuel, Stefan Berger, Soffer, Stapleton) no study has taken comprehensive popular histories of the nation as the focus.² The historiography of Britain has been much more extensively covered for the nineteenth century. The scope of the texts in this study has been limited to comprehensive popular accounts of English/British history for the 'general reader', usually by a single author, produced in the twentieth century. School text-books or works for children and young people are also excluded.

There are some comments to be made about each of these criteria. Comprehensive accounts give a view of the overall narrative arc of national history. Their beginning as well as their end dates indicate the author's view of what kind of entity this is and how its history can best be understood. But not every one of these histories is completely comprehensive. Most cover what they construct as the whole period of English/British history beginning with pre-history, or the Romans, or the Anglo-Saxons, and ending around the time of writing or occasionally somewhat earlier, e.g., with the Second World War. Exceptions are works starting later: Trevelyan's *English Social History*, a significant work by a major historian, beginning with Chaucer, (although he had intended to start earlier), and *The Long March of Everyman*, the print version of which begins in 1760. Harrison's *The common people: a history from the Norman Conquest to the present* begins around 1066 although he does not explain his choice of start date. Hibbert's social history *The English* also has 1066 as its start date, also without explanation for his choice. Some of the works discussed in chapter 4 on national history in the Second World War also do not completely fit these criteria. The description of the nation when it was so threatened is important to understanding its conception over time, and how these events affected people's ideas about the identity of the nation.

² Peter Mandler, Professor of Modern Cultural History, University of Cambridge; John Burrow, (1935 - 2009) Professor of Intellectual History, University of Sussex, author of *A Liberal Descent* (1981); Christopher Parker, formerly Professor of History at Edge Hill University; David Cannadine, formerly Director of the Institute of Historical Research University of London, currently Dodge Professor of History, University of Princeton USA; Raphael Samuel, (1934-1996), British Marxist historian and one of the founders of *Past and Present*; Stefan Berger, formerly chair of the European Science Foundation research project on writing national histories: 'Representations of the Past: National Histories in Europe', currently Director of the Institute for Social Movements and the Library of the Ruhr Foundation; Reba N Soffer, Emeritus Professor, California State University Northridge Los Angeles, winner of the 2012 Pacific Coast Conference on British Studies (PCCBS) prize for *History, Historians and Conservatism in Britain and America* (2010); Julia Stapleton, reader in Politics University of Durham, author of studies of Ernest Barker, Arthur Bryant and G K Chesterton.

Second, the books in this study are not aimed at other historians. At the beginning of the twentieth century the professionalisation of history meant that practitioners were keen to separate scientific history for fellow academics from literary accounts for the public. Nor do these books have school or university students as their principal intended readership. However, books written before the Second World War had more crossover among their audiences than works produced later. For example, the *TLS* reviewer thought Carrington's too good to be confined solely to school use.³ It has often been believed that one of history's functions in society is the education of its citizens.

Lastly, this study considers histories of England/Britain, works limited to this geographical/political area. Books are sometimes called histories of England, sometimes histories of Britain. However, it is worth noting that there is no sign that the public who read books variously called by such titles as 'History of England' (32 histories with 'England' or 'English' in the title published in the twentieth century) or 'History of Britain' (15 books with 'Britain' or 'British' in the title) had any difficulty in understanding what the work would be about, although the name of the place is not a reliable guide to the coverage of the history. A few extend their coverage: Innes included the British Empire in his four-volume history published in 1913-15; Lettice Fisher, a rare female author in this genre, unusually paired her history of England with that of Europe (*An introductory history of England and Europe*, 1935), and Winston Churchill constructed the subject of his history as 'The English-speaking peoples'. The changing identity and self-description of the nation was an important element in these national histories.

The main exception to the single author criterion is *The Long March of Everyman*. In its published form it is an edited account. But it was sufficiently significant in the development of national history in several ways (see chapter 6) to warrant inclusion. Two works by joint authors, Mitchell and Leys, *A history of the English people* (1950) and Maude and Powell's *Biography of a nation* (1955), are also included. These were each written from a single point of view and so share the characteristics of single author works. Single author versions, where editors do not generally impose an interpretative framework, show more clearly the assumptions and overall conception of national history than multi-author accounts.

Although any history takes into account events and circumstances existing before the story starts, Victorian accounts of the nation are different in kind. The new century saw different national histories as the nation emerged from Victorian culture. Although as chapter 2 indicates, histories of the nation for the public were written before the twentieth century,

³ *TLS* 9 March 1933, 169-170 'New Books and Reprints' [reviewer not at present identified 5 May 2006]

most notably by Macaulay, historians produced more in the pre-First World War period, and thereafter in increasing numbers. These were works of a different character aimed at a different readership from increasingly professionalised, academic works.

The study ends at the millennium, with books published in 2000, although Frank Welsh's *The Four Nations: A History of the United Kingdom* was published in 2002. Any cut off point is arbitrary; the turn of a century or even a millennium is not itself an indicator of a turning point in the narrative approach. But Welsh's history is an example of British national history as the history of four nations that developed in the 1980s but has not been widely used since. As such it linked back to an earlier approach, rather than looking forward to new histories. To continue after 2000 would create the problem of deciding an alternative appropriate cut-off date, given that new works are being published all the time. And popular histories of the nation have begun to be differently presented in recent years, being increasingly tied in to television presentations, and written with increasingly distinctive, often very personal approaches.

Rationale

Major changes internationally, domestically and historiographically have stimulated historians to shift their approach to British history. Britain's role in the world has altered significantly since the end of the Second World War. Decolonisation has changed not only Britain's relations with the rest of the world, but also its relations with immigrants to the UK, leading the British to question their identity. British membership of the EU has encouraged similar reflection. With the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly and developments in Northern Ireland, the British are beginning to wonder whether the components of the United Kingdom will stay linked, perhaps in new relationships, or break apart. Changes in the scope and methodology of history have changed the approach to national history. How the histories of Scotland, Wales and Ireland are handled in the context of English/British history is of considerable contemporary interest.

Accounts of British historiography often do not directly address the question of why British historiography is interesting or significant. It is a different question from the purposes of national history more generally, but analyses of it often seem to assume they are the same. Quoting two views of history by Thatcher and Major, Cannadine only suggested that there was a link between their view of national history as Whiggish and English and their approach to

national policy issues, leaving readers to infer the nature of the connection.⁴ Burrow wrote about what we learn by studying historiography, leaving us to appreciate why this is of interest and importance.⁵

Mandler thought that the purpose of British historiography is 'to sort out these multiple uses of history, to show when and why they have arisen...and to suggest what uses of history the work of the professional historian can appropriately support'. He did not think that the two answers commonly given for studying history – that it teaches lessons for the present and tells us who we are – adequately capture history's rationale for either professional historians or for general readers. Rather, history is the way we fulfil our moral obligation to remember past atrocities, and to explore exotic places and very different people, as well as familiar heroes of the past.⁶ However, when we look at the reasons given for studying the historiography of histories of Britain we find that ideas about the lessons of history are more important and compelling than Mandler allows. National historiography conveys lessons we can learn, lessons about the background to contemporary problems in our nation. The History and Policy project at King's College London, for example, 'works for better public policy through an understanding of history by connecting historians, policy makers and the media... believ[ing that] study of the past can offer important lessons for the twenty-first century'.⁷ John Tosh has recently argued that just as the expansion of the democratic franchise in the nineteenth century created a need to educate the new electorate, so we need similar initiatives today.⁸

Studying British historiography, understanding how the national past has been represented, clarifies how our thinking about the character of our nation has changed: why British national history used to be very Anglo-centric but is now much less so; why it used to be written as if the Empire were important to the account; how gender, class, belief and race have been treated in the narratives. Readers can then understand better what is involved in contemporary debates about what the nation is, how its interests are defined and what policy choices are open. For example:

- What is at stake in the debate about how long the United Kingdom might continue in its present form
- What Britain's interests are in relation to European structures

⁴ David Cannadine, *Making History Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies and Explanations* (Palgrave Macmillan 2008), 171-72

⁵ John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (Penguin 2009), xv

⁶ Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (Profile Books 2002), 2-4

⁷ <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/> [accessed 18 June 2012]

⁸ John Tosh, 'Citizen Scholars', *History Today* vol 62 issue 7 (July 2012), 44-46

- The continuing unresolved debate over how national history is taught in schools
- What is an appropriate role for Britain to play internationally
- What our relationship with the USA should be in the future
- What policy options with what consequences are available on immigration

Method

This study's main method has been to study and analyse texts and compare interpretations. The study supplements and contextualises analyses of texts by interviewing historians, and by considering publishers' archives and historians' papers. Six historians helped by answering my questions: four by face-to-face interview, one by email and one by telephone. Although Simon Schama indicated he was willing to talk to me, I decided to rely on his filmed account (in the additional material to the DVD of *A History of Britain*), on his talks and articles about the making of the programmes, and on the lengthy discussion in the *AHR Forum*; this seemed likely to provide sufficient material, particularly as the series had been completed by 2000 and Schama had moved on to other projects. Publishers' archives were disappointing. Sometimes they contained only one or two items, such as a letter from an author requesting a minor change; in the case of Williamson's *The Evolution of England*, published by OUP in 1931, the publisher had weeded the archive, removing the documents relating to the original publication, because a second edition was produced in 1944 and they no longer needed the earlier material.⁹ Additionally, publishers' usual practice is not to allow access to their archives until thirty years after the creation of the documents to protect their commercial interests. Historians' personal papers also shed light on the impetus to write their accounts and the publication process.

Themes in the study

This study uses four topics to create an interpretative framework:

1. What happened to the 'Whig Interpretation of History'? Does it persist in popular even if not in academic history?
2. What the nation is seen as/how the nation is conceived. Is the nation England only or does it include Scotland, Wales and Ireland? How far is the Empire included?

⁹ OUP archive PB/ED 006528

3. How do academic differ from non-academic writers?
4. What function do the histories have in the culture and how does this change?

This study is structured chronologically to show how the narratives have changed over time. To have considered one topic at a time would have had advantages in tracing how significant ideas in English/British history had arisen and changed, but this would have created a fragmented account that would not have conveyed adequately what the study set out to show.

CHAPTER 1 WRITING AND READING THE NATION

Why is national history written? In order to understand the continuing appeal of national history we need to understand who and what the history was about, how it was shaped and told, who wrote it and who it was intended for. Telling a story of origins and developments is part of the process of understanding how things have come to be the way they are.¹ Broad overviews of British history for the general reader are histories written in a narrative mode and thus share characteristics with other narratives, so the general features of narrative writing provide a useful framework for understanding how these accounts of national history are constructed and how they function in the culture. These features, as set out below, are used in this study to structure the discussion.

- What kind of story is it? Who are its heroes and who its villains? Is its tone assertive or regretful? Is its narrative arc triumphalist or declinist? Is this a Whig history, moving inevitably towards a favoured present? Or is it rather an argument about a particular interpretation of English/British history?
- How is the story shaped? What episodes are emphasised, when does it begin and end? Although these are 'national' histories, the writer needs to explain how the nation is defined in their history. What are its parameters and how is this conception justified?
- How does the history fit with existing ideas about the nation's past?
- Who are the authors of the histories? What is their background, and what assumptions are they likely to have? Are there different categories of historians with different approaches?
- Who reads these histories and what effect do these accounts have on the audience?

The function of popular history in the culture: national identity and narrative

Narrative constructs identity, and historical narrative constructs national identity. The process by which this happens is telling a story, usually about the group's origins and destiny.²

Historians created representations of the past 'through which people structured their sense of the world and of their society, and the self-images and beliefs they shared as part of a

¹ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP 1997 reissue 2000) 82

² David Carr, 'Narrative and the Real World', in *The History and Narrative Reader*, ed Geoffrey Roberts, (Routledge, 2001) 152-155

common cultural stock'.³ The national histories discussed here would appear to be addressed largely to a British readership. A few of these popular histories (Hamilton, Clark and Elton) were also marketed in the USA. Whilst some readers may not identify with the nation whose origins are traced, the main reason and purpose of such histories was to provide a 'validating narrative' for those whose story is being told.⁴

As Pocock noted, political communities have always related their histories to record their origins and development. The point of such narratives is to affirm the legitimacy of the society's power structure and so to maintain its authority. These narratives are selective, rhetorical and biased, and so create a structure of myth and ideology.⁵ However, the narrative needs to find acceptance within the particular community if it is to function as a creator of that community. As David Carr observed, the national history may be told by a few (a small number of narrators), but it must be told on behalf of all, addressed to all and largely accepted by all.⁶ However, this view minimises the way national history is used politically to encourage particular conceptions of citizenship, and how some groups are pushed to the edge or even right out of the national story. The group whose story is being written may be more or less inclusive at different times in a nation's history, and this is certainly true for English/British history. The particular account of 'our' national history may be challenged by versions that criticise and produce alternative narratives; in Britain these have been at various times Catholic, Marxist and 'four nations' histories. Societies debate with themselves as to what they are, have been, and ought to be, and this debate encourages contested versions of what has occurred in history.⁷ Anyone may challenge the sovereignty in whose name the history is written and relate histories that are believed to entitle them to make this challenge.⁸

With national histories, we are ourselves the subject, the narrator and the audience. They are stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Learning national history is a way to understand our place in the particular nation in which we find ourselves, or which we adopt; and our point in time, in relation to our forebears or to the people who used to live where we now live. In telling this story, we discover and create the sort of people 'we' are; we identify ourselves as 'the sort of people who...' have certain attributes or behave in certain ways. As far as we as individuals have those features or adopt that behaviour, we are affirming our identity with the

³ John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (Allen Lane 2007) 497

⁴ John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Basingstoke Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 13

⁵ John Pocock, 'Conclusion: history, sovereignty, identity' in *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (CUP 2005) 304

⁶ David Carr, 'Getting the Story Straight', in *The History and Narrative Reader*, 199

⁷ Pocock, 'Conclusion: history, sovereignty, identity', 305

⁸ Pocock, 'Conclusion: history, sovereignty, identity', 306

group whose story we are being told. Telling the story of our past creates a sense of oneness and belonging and tells of an identity persisting through time. One reason for the re-tellings of national history is to do the work of linking the changed and changing present to the past, to establish continuities so that we think of the present nation as the same collective entity as the past nation. So, as well as expressing our knowledge of who we are, national history in the process helps to contribute to the formation and continuation of the group, the nation.⁹ Identity needs to be constructed; it is not a fixed, finished attribute changeless over a lifetime, but a process of becoming, constantly being renegotiated and re-imagined.

What is being created by national history is the nation itself, the nation as a social construct, as a group with a sense of continuity, shared memory and collective destiny.¹⁰ We are story-telling beings, and we tell stories to locate ourselves in time and space. As Daniel Dennett puts it:

We...are almost constantly engaged in presenting ourselves to others and to ourselves, and hence representing ourselves...Our fundamental tactic of self-protection...and self-definition is...telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are...Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source.¹¹

In national history the endpoint of the narrative is national development, generally where the nation is at present; but the shape we give to that story, what sort of story we decide to tell and how we construct it, is conditioned by our values and beliefs. We choose particular endpoints for our stories because they mean something for us; they are understood to be desirable or not desirable.¹² It is only within a specific culture that an endpoint can be understood as having the value ascribed to it: for instance, the battle of Waterloo is an English victory but a French defeat; universal suffrage is a working class achievement but a betrayal of elite values.

National histories are often particular examples of large, essential, universal stories that encapsulate long-standing, deep-rooted aspects of the culture. A metanarrative is regarded as the single, true story, or the real meaning of history, into which more limited and particular

⁹ D Carr, 'Narrative and the real world', in *The History and Narrative Reader* (Routledge 2002) 153

¹⁰ Jonathan Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006) 40

¹¹ Daniel C Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Penguin Press 1993) 417-18

¹² Kenneth J Gergen, *Narrative, Moral Identity and Historical Consciousness: a Social Constructionist Account* <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/kgergen1/web/page.phtml?id=manu3> [accessed 24 November 2009]

stories are incorporated and against which they are judged. In the West, the metanarrative is rooted in the Judeo-Christian religion. This is so even though the story has now been almost completely secularised. The metanarrative in which English/British history has been situated is most often a story of progressive (European) history whose elements, as Peter Burke notes, consist of the rise of modern western civilisation via ancient Greece and Rome, Christianity, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.¹³ Some events are considered essential in forming the identity of the nation. One such is the French Revolution which is thought of as constructing modern France. It becomes 'part of the narrative identity of the collective (in this case the French people); defining who "we" are implies telling "our" (hi)story'.¹⁴ An English example is the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. But, as Geoffrey Barraclough pointed out, 'What society calls for – and too often gets – is not history but myth, the cement which holds all society together.' Barraclough was echoing a widely held view that the function of historians was to puncture myths, not create them.¹⁵ However, as far as popular national history is concerned, myths remain inevitable.

The shape of the narrative: selection and periodisation

Historical interpretations arise partly because all narratives are made, constructed by authors who pose their own questions (although usually within an accepted body of issues their profession acknowledges). These authors provide their own answers by selecting particular events and pieces of evidence to tell the story. The character of England/Britain is a very long story. When we tell it, we usually select a small number of events.

History, especially that covering long periods of time, has to be divided into segments to make it manageable both to write and to comprehend. All periodisation is artificial, imposed by the historian on the continuous past and is an act of interpretation. A particular structure for English/British history, relying largely on changes to dynasties and so reflecting a political understanding of the character of national history, was developed in the nineteenth century and has been used, although not exclusively, ever since. The earlier periods particularly have acquired names relating to rulers: the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, the Plantagenets, the Tudors, the Stuarts.

¹³ Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Polity Press 2004) 44

¹⁴ Simon Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory* (Harlow, Pearson Longman 2006) 41

¹⁵ Geoffrey Barraclough, *Guardian* 20 October 1961, quoted in Richard Evans, new introduction to E H Carr *What Is History?* (Palgrave reissue 2001) xxiv

Periodisation by monarch implies that rulers, political developments, government, are what gives history its meaning and signals a concern with political elites. The conventional period structure of English/British history privileges the history of the political and creates an assumption that this is the essential content of our national history.¹⁶ Some period names are especially contested. In English seventeenth century history for example, the terms 'English Revolution', 'Interregnum' 'Eleven Years' Tyranny' all signal an ideological stance. Later periods are often named for the century, or, when writing about the nineteenth, describing it as Victorian, use the adjective that identifies the ruler with the style. Social and economic histories fit more loosely this type of periodisation. In his *English Social History*, instead of the name of the ruler, Trevelyan uses a name from literature such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Defoe, and Dr Johnson. When he cannot find more of these, he reverts to epithets like 'Tudor' or 'the second half of the Victorian era'.

Alternatively, national history may be written with endpoints that take, not the nation's government and high politics, but social, cultural or economic features of society. Inter-war history became more 'social' in subject matter, although it had long dealt with social life as well as political and military matters. Economic and social history were alternative ways to understand the history of the nation, that appealed particularly to those who wanted to use history to explain contemporary problems of working people and to propose solutions. But comprehensive social histories of the nation were not produced until after the Second World War. Because political history was the default version of national history, works that treated other features signalled their perspective in their titles, for example, Trevelyan's *English Social History*, and Asa Briggs', *A Social History of England*. The almost unthinking earlier identification of national history with political history is now passing.

The starting and finishing dates of national histories also imply different views of the nature of our national history. Histories of Britain or England written in the twentieth century begin at one of three points in time: with pre-history, describing early migrations and sometimes also the physical separation of the British Isles from the European land mass; with the coming of the Romans; or with the Anglo-Saxon invasions. To begin with pre-history, which has been quite common in all national histories, suggests very long continuity. This early beginning also links our history to European histories and wider contexts, although referring to geography often emphasises the separation of the British Isles from Europe. Historians who choose to

¹⁶ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (Hodder Education 2nd edition 2006) 108, 115

start with the Romans usually make the point that this is when written records begin and so suggest – or sometimes make explicit – a view that history is principally based on the surviving written record. Those who begin with the Anglo-Saxons do so to demonstrate their belief that only these people are the true ancestors of the English, and it was only in their time that the nation of England emerged. Before then, England had been a province of the Roman Empire, an arrangement that left little or no impact on the subsequent nation. First chapter titles from recent popular histories illustrate the point: Schama's is 'At the Edge of the World'; Jeremy Black has 'Pre-Roman and Roman Britain' and Geoffrey Elton chose 'The Emergence of England'. These tell us when the author thinks English history began and its initial theme (geography, rulers, nation building).¹⁷

Most of the histories discussed in this study end at the time of their writing, indicating that the present state of the nation is the endpoint of the narrative, the meaning and significance of which it is the function of national history to explain. When they stop earlier it may be because, like Belloc they find that

The nearer an historical matter comes to our own time, the more difficult it is to put it into the right perspective; and since it is the business of the historian to judge the business of cause and effect, the less can true history be written and the more does that necessity for suspending judgement make the relation of past things more and more of a mere chronicle.¹⁸

Or they may find that their conception of the nation cannot include the changing nature of Britain in the present. This is particularly a problem for histories written after 1945.

Periodisation and selection play a considerable role in creating the overall interpretation of the history of our country. Traditional periodisation is just that – traditional, handing on a way of dividing up the nation's past in order to create a particular view of the nation's identity. It transmits a basic version of national history in which the story is fixed and not open to challenge, in which it is certain and not open to different understandings. Likewise the selection of episodes, where key events are picked out on which to hang the story, giving it a recognisable shape. These accounts 'represent a core of cultural knowledge to which future generations are expected to assimilate and support'.¹⁹

The subject of the narrative: different concepts of the English/British nation

¹⁷ Simon Schama, *History of Britain* vol 1 (BBC books 2000); Jeremy Black, *A History of the British Isles* (Palgrave Macmillan 2nd edition 2003); Geoffrey Elton, *The English* (Blackwell Oxford 1992)

¹⁸ Belloc, *A Shorter History of England* (Harrap 1934) 612

¹⁹ Stuart Foster and Keith Crawford, eds *What Shall We Tell the Children? International Perspectives in School History Textbooks* (Information Age Publishers, North Carolina USA 2006)

During the nineteenth, and for some of the earlier part of the twentieth century, the nation was regarded as the obvious subject for history. It was on the basis of national history that the historical practice became professionalized through academic journals and in universities. Previously, the only history studied in universities was that of Greece and Rome; but from the latter part of the nineteenth century national history was the topic of undergraduate history courses. It is still commonly a big part of university courses and of school history.

For many historians the nation is not only the most obvious subject, it also functions as an actor in history. Some historians presented the nation as if it were a person; for example Lettice Fisher, wrote that 'England had discovered... that her future lay not in France but in the development of her own liberties'.^{20 21} Writing like this was what Huizinga called 'historical anthropomorphism'.²² Notable here too is the personalisation of the nation, in the case of Britain as feminine. We speak our 'mother-tongue', and England or Britain is definitely she. We talk of 'the mother-country' (Britain) or 'Mother Russia' or 'the Fatherland' (Germany). The nation is often seen as family: we are born into or adopt a nation. Orwell thought that the best description of the English in the 1930s was 'A family with the wrong members in control'.²³ Inhabitants and citizens are constituted as fathers, mothers, sons, daughters of the nation, each with their gendered rights and duties. Discussions of the nation rely on 'natural' gendered differences and roles. Patriotism is a passionate love, usually expressed by men, for the gendered, female country that, like women, needs protection from harm or threats.²⁴ Wingfield-Stratford's *History of English Patriotism* is a clear example of this attitude (see chapter 3).

It is often unclear when we refer to national history whether we are talking about the English nation, or the British nation, or the British state, or the United Kingdom of Great Britain and (Northern) Ireland. Adrian Hastings noted that even as early as Bede, there was confusion about whether the history was about England – the book was called *History of the English Church and People* – or about Britain, which forms the opening – and closing – subject matter

²⁰ Lettice Fisher, *An introductory history of England and Europe from the earliest times to the present day*, (Gollancz 1935) 261

²¹ Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (Routledge 2002) 80

²² Raphael Samuel, 'Continuous national history', in *Patriotism: the Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* vol 1 *History and Politics* ed idem (Routledge 1989) 12

²³ George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn' in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* vol 2 *My Country Right or Left 1940-1943* (Penguin, Harmondsworth Middx 1971) 88

²⁴ Mrinhalina Sinha, 'Gender and Nation' in *The Feminist History Reader*, ed Sue Morgan (Routledge 2006) 324-27

of the book. Bede was also clear that not only the English, but also the Scots, Picts and Britons lived in Britain.²⁵

Describing national history as the history of England implies that the focus is on the cultural community, its members bound together by their shared character, rather than the nation-state. Authors refer to 'the English' as if they were a homogenous group with clear characteristics that persist over time. In these histories, this is a national community that also sees itself as a political and territorial community. This group constructed first a unified English state, then one that incorporated Wales, later one whose monarch was also monarch of a neighbouring state, eventually uniting that neighbouring kingdom with itself, creating a United Kingdom which also incorporated Ireland in whole or in part, and that had links of shared character, citizenship, legal and education systems. However, the shape of the British state might have been different if wars had turned out differently. The Roman frontier moved back and forth in the north of Britain. Later, England excluded parts of the north of the country that were included by Scotland; the border with Wales was a shifting one for long periods. Between the mid eleventh century and the mid sixteenth century, the English king was also ruler in many parts of what we now call France. Whether Ireland was to be part of the British state was contested constantly from the mid twelfth to the early twentieth century. The English eventually established a boundary containing England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but were not able to retain southern Ireland where another national identity formed. However, southern Ireland might have remained part of Britain, while Scotland might have stayed as an independent kingdom.²⁶ Present-day devolution in Wales and Scotland reminds us that the United Kingdom is a multi-national state, a political creation, which may not necessarily remain in its present form. So although all national historians face issues about national identity, the historian of England/Britain faces them in an especially acute form.

So both the idea of what a nation is, and the particular construction of the nation of England/Britain, are highly contested. Histories studied here more often referred to England than to Britain in their titles. These histories generally emphasised political history, almost always the history of England, with Scotland, Wales and Ireland introduced where the histories of those nations intersect with that of England. Most of our national history is still written like this, although more recent works include rather more on Scotland, Wales and Ireland than used to be the case. And of course England is the most populous and most influential by far, so there is a rationale for this emphasis not based in partiality alone. To justify his focus on

²⁵ Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (CUP, Cambridge 1997) 36-37

²⁶ Summary from Mike O'Donnell, *Introducing Sociology* (Nelson 4th ed 1997) 240

England, Simon Jenkins argued that Scotland, Wales and Ireland were separate countries with their own histories. He views these places, and England, as ethnic communities, whereas Britain or the United Kingdom, is no more than one of two 'confederacies' to which England belongs, the other being the European Union.²⁷ In taking this approach, Jenkins is emphasising the deep origins of national identity, rooted in history, rather than the modern civic construction adopted by the government's citizenship strand in the National Curriculum. This, in contrast, specifies three groups of concepts for citizenship studies: democracy and justice, rights and responsibilities, and identities and diversity.²⁸ These are values to which many nations would subscribe.

Since the mid-1970s, a new approach to English/British history has developed. Known as 'Four Nations history', it was first advocated by John Pocock and paid attention to the wider context, particularly that of the British Isles, in which the history of England is situated.²⁹ Four Nations history was also a response to a sense of the tiredness with traditional British political history – there had been only six new histories of Britain published in the twenty years 1960 to 1980 – although new ways of writing history generally were being developed.³⁰ While some British history was written using the new approach, national histories with other interpretations continued to be produced. These are discussed in chapter 8. Kenneth Morgan's edited *Oxford History of Britain* (OUP 1984) went some way towards an inclusive approach in a multi-author single volume. However, OUP's new major historical multi-volume national history is still named the (New) History of England, which began appearing in 1994. The General Editor justified the Anglo-centric orientation, arguing that the English monarchy provided the core of state-building, but asserting that this did not imply a neglect of Scottish, Irish or Welsh history.³¹

Moves towards devolution have resulted in fresh approaches to the histories of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland as each nation grows in national self-consciousness rather than a general shift towards writing inclusive 'British' history. The integrated approach taking Britain

²⁷ Simon Jenkins, *A Short History of England* (Profile Books 2011) 9

²⁸

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/secondary/b00199157/citizenship/ks3/programme/concept>

²⁹

John Pocock, 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', *AHR*, vol 47 no 4 (1975) 601-28

³⁰ Paul O'Leary, 'Historians and the "new" British history' in ed Paul Lambert and Phillipp Schofield, *Making History: An introduction to the history and practices of a discipline* (Routledge 2004) 217

³¹ J M Roberts, General Editor's Preface, *The New Oxford History of England* in Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford Clarendon Press 2006) vii

as its focus has not been widely taken up.³² Nor, as Joseph Hardwick pointed out, has the other aspect of Pocock's recommendations for a new approach, that of widening out to include British settlement in north America, India and other parts of the world, producing an 'oceanic' interpretation.³³

David Armitage claimed that nineteenth and twentieth century national history had little place for empire.³⁴ For popular national histories this is not wholly correct. Works by Innes and Wingfield-Stratford examined British involvement in India and South Africa, and referred to Australasia. Churchill and Schama writing later featured the actions of Britain in founding and sustaining the empire. Almost all popular histories discuss English settlement in north America and their subsequent loss. Other parts of the world were constructed as backward, ignorant and history-less.³⁵ There is no appreciation in any of the histories examined here that there were already people living in those areas of the world where imperial expansion took place, creating the myth of empty lands. India was the exception, but here the indigenous people were characterised as needing western, British culture and political and legal systems.

National histories separated domestic from European or imperial history. There was no discussion of the relationship between the nation and the empire, no account of how people back home in Britain thought and felt about it.³⁶ The history of the empire was recounted separately in multi-volume works, first by Cambridge with *The Cambridge History of the British Empire* (1929-59), later by Oxford with their *Oxford History of the British Empire* (1998-99).³⁷ It is only recently that Catherine Hall, for instance, has argued that it is necessary to write the history of Britain as a nation formed in key aspects by its relationship to the peoples and cultures of the empire it created, rather than a unitary story of a single, white, homogenous nation.³⁸

³² Paul Ward, review of Frank Welsh *The Four Nations: a History of the United Kingdom*, *Canadian Journal of History* vol 39 issue 3, (2004), 650-652; Richard Finlay, 'New Britain, new Scotland, new history? the impact of devolution on the development of Scottish historiography', *Journal of Contemporary History* vol 36 no 2 (2001), 383-93

³³ Joseph Hardwick, Research Associate, University of York Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past, *Historians and 'Britishness'*, (n/d) www.york.ac.uk/ipup/projects/britishness/discussion/hardwick.html

³⁴ David Armitage, 'Greater Britain: A useful category of historical analysis?' *AHR*, vol 104 no 2 (1999), 428: 427-445

³⁵ Gunn, p 128

³⁶ Catherine Hall and Keith McClelland, 'Introduction' *Race, nation and empire: making histories, 1750-present* (Manchester University Press, Manchester 2010)

³⁷ Keith Robbins, 'British Space' *History Compass* 7/1, (2009), 68; Cannadine, 'Nation', *Making History Now and Then*, 219

³⁸ Hall and McClelland, 8-9

Historians of England/Britain make a point of deciding when the territory and people they have been describing can be said to have become a nation. Some even have chapters headed 'Becoming a nation'. Their disagreement about when this happened for England accounts for some of the variations in interpretation. The most common dates they give for this achievement for England/Britain are the thirteenth century (the establishment of parliament and the conquest of Wales and Scotland), and the sixteenth (the creation of the state church and the flowering of English literature). A few, as we have seen, note the tenth century and the first single monarch in England. Thus most regard England as an old established nation, not one created out of various modernist impulses. Krishan Kumar, unusually, claims that English national identity did not emerge until the nineteenth century, having previously been suppressed and expressed within an imperial identity.³⁹ More recently it has been thought that concern with when the nation emerged shows a nostalgic concern with origins. Postmodernism rejects the notion that real knowledge of the past can be obtained and sees concern with origins as old fashioned, belonging to a different, earlier way of regarding knowledge of the past.⁴⁰

Whenever they perceive the nation to have 'arrived', all these histories tell the story of a long-existing nation that has survived many threats, creating a self-image of endurance. Being told as a story of longevity, national history unites the past and the present, proposing connectedness of the living, the dead and the yet unborn. Britain or England is thus constructed as a single whole, and its history sometimes used, as in the Second World War, to manufacture an apparent unity of purpose and effort that was necessary for the nation to survive. Divisions of class, religion, gender and region are smoothed over or ignored in the aim of narrating, and so constructing, a powerful unified nation. It is only more recently, since the mid 1980s, that the divisions within the nation, for example between its constituent nations, have been recognised more explicitly and treated historically. Furthermore, by 2000 popular histories of Britain had yet to construct the nation as multi-cultural.

³⁹ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, (Cambridge, CUP 2003)

⁴⁰ Gunn, 119

Cultural influences on the narrative: social memory

Readers rarely come to popular national history without any background knowledge. In spite of the findings of researchers and the complaints of authors, most readers already possess an outline of the history that they will find in the text. Some of this knowledge will have come from history lessons at school, some from stories of the nation's past shared by successive generations and transmitted through books, commemorations and many varieties of media. These social memories permeate the general awareness of those living in a particular culture and have an important influence on the kind of national history that appeals in particular societies.

Societies, including nations, use these memories and beliefs to create, to use the American term, 'usable pasts'. Additionally, noted Wertsch, groups use collective memory to understand themselves as having remained the same through time with an essential truth of identity.⁴¹ Just as historians produce new versions of the national narrative to respond to new perspectives on the past, so social memories adapt similarly. As the last survivor of the trenches in the First World War dies, and those from the Second are also being lost through death, efforts are made to retain those memories through museum displays and recording interviews with these eyewitnesses. The needs of representation change as time creates greater distance from the event.⁴²

We can clearly see social memory operating in English history. As Malcolm Smith has demonstrated, the nation's experience in 1940 of Dunkirk, the battle of Britain and the Blitz was mythologised to make a 'powerful discourse' of British national identity, conveyed in phrases like 'the finest hour', 'the few' and 'the people's war'.⁴³ This way of thinking about 1940 shows that myths are 'simplified and exceptionally highly condensed accounts', and that they are extremely resistant to modification by the production of historical evidence.⁴⁴ The Dunkirk story is particularly interesting in that it was consciously framed in this mythological way immediately after the event, when the government needed a positive, uplifting way to tell the nation what had happened, and interesting too that people were aware of its being so constructed from the time it was first made public.⁴⁵ Attempts by for instance, Angus Calder,

⁴¹ James Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, (Cambridge, CUP 2002) 41, 42

⁴² Wertsch, 45

⁴³ Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory*, (Routledge 2000)

⁴⁴ Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 103

⁴⁵ Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime* (Headline 2004) 176-182

(*The Peoples' War* and *The Myth of the Blitz*) and Corelli Barnett (*The Collapse of British Power* and *The Audit of War*) to 'debunk' aspects of the generally accepted story of that time were not very successful. The big picture remains even when the facts are corrected because it is now much too important to our sense of who we are for us to remove it from our narrative. What really happened is less significant for constructing national identity than how an event or episode is imagined. Hobsbawm comments further that, although historians can show a story to be false, this does not of itself create another story, still less a better one.⁴⁶

Further examples from England are the Gunpowder Plot and the Armada. Both were commemorated from the seventeenth century onwards, and both have continuing resonance.⁴⁷ Guy Fawkes Day is still celebrated, and the Armada featured in patriotic rhetoric in the Second World War and more recently at the time of the Falklands war.⁴⁸ Berger notes that 'battles and wars take up a larger proportion of national histories than any other subject, as the nation is forged, made and remade in and after military conflict'.⁴⁹ Narratives of warfare are prominent in British histories, especially in earlier ones, where the details of battles are lengthily rehearsed. Churchill's history is a notable example, coloured one imagines by the experience of the First and Second World Wars. Mythical figures or episodes where someone challenges oppressive rule feature in English history as collective historical memories, Boudicca for example. A further instance is of the nation defeating the enemies who threaten its way of life or existence e.g. Drake (as in *Drake's Drum*); the myth of Arthur, sleeping until roused, to save England from peril again; Nelson (but not Wellington). Nelson and Trafalgar are interesting because, as Raphael Samuel pointed out, Trafalgar was not a significant battle in the war against Napoleon; it was the circumstances of Nelson's death that made the event mythic for the English.⁵⁰ These are resources to be called on in time of danger and were given prominence in Second World War rhetoric.

Other instances of social memory operating to remember both conflict and dissent are found in Ireland as Peter Burke notes. Here, events from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries inform present day attitudes. The siege of Londonderry in 1688 and the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 are commemorated each year by Protestants in the Apprentice Boys and Orangemen marches. Slogans from the past, such as 'No Surrender', are applied to the present in Belfast

⁴⁶ E J Hobsbawm, 'Identity history is not enough', in *On History* (Abacus, 2005) 362

⁴⁷ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Blackwell Oxford 1992) 129

⁴⁸ Bill Williamson, *The Temper Of The Times: British Society Since World War II* (Blackwell Oxford 1990) 242

⁴⁹ Stefan Berger, 'On the Role of Myths and History in the Construction of National Identity in Modern Europe', *European History Quarterly* vol 39, no 3, (2009) 493, 494

⁵⁰ Raphael Samuel, 'Heroes below the Hooves of History', in *Theatres of Memory* vol II *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (Verso) 203

for example. In the south of Ireland, it is the memory of the rising of 1798, seen as a key moment in the development of independent Ireland, which is very much alive. In these ways, claims Burke, 'differences between past and present are elided, and unintended consequences are turned into conscious aims, as if the main purpose of these past heroes had been to bring about the present – our present'.⁵¹

One function of social memory is forgetting. Aspects of some events or even whole episodes in a nation's history that do not 'fit' with the dominant story are edited out of the generally accepted narrative. Dunkirk, discussed above, is a clear example of an event remembered as heroic when even at the time it was known to be the result of error. The Open University radio series, *The Things We Forgot To Remember*, challenges our ideas about key events or institutions in British history, 'finding the events that drop from view'.⁵² The series has looked at such 'mythical' events as Magna Carta, the 1945 general election and the reasons why Hitler did not invade Britain in 1940, in each case providing a new story that more accurately reflects the evidence. But, as with Dunkirk, the collective memory is probably too deeply embedded to allow for change.

Nor are historians themselves unaffected by how social memory works. Hobsbawm noted that 'Historians do not and cannot stand outside their subject as objective observers and analysts *sub specie aeternitatis*. All of us are plunged into the assumptions of our times and places.'⁵³ They may, as Fentress and Wickham suggest, fulfil the role of giving 'an objective veneer' to patterns of 'self-legitimation' created in the collective memory. If this is so, it is because the ideas and beliefs we have about our national past are almost impossible to shake off, as Keith Robbins perceptively observed:

Historians who investigate the long past of their own country have both advantage and disadvantage. From childhood onwards they have received a long induction into its conventions and institutions, and have explored its landscape. They may subsequently scrupulously cultivate detachment and seek objectivity, but cannot ultimately escape the influence of their environment. They inevitably absorb, to a greater or lesser degree, its working myths and assumptions, by virtue of their own social existence. They know, or think they know, "their" past as much by intuition and experience as by the fruits of their reading and research. There is the danger, in consequence, that they take that past as normative and miss its oddity. A history written by "outsiders", on the other hand, can be more sharply aware of national idiosyncrasy, but it may also not "ring true" because external onlookers may not fully grasp the rules of the national game.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Polity Press Cambridge 1997) 55, 59

⁵² <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/profiles/the-things-we-forgot-remember-team>

⁵³ Hobsbawm, 364

⁵⁴ Keith Robbins, *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness* (Longman 1998) xiii

The historians whose books are studied here all share some cultural assumptions, and while their living at different times creates some variation between them, there remain beliefs they cannot shake off.

Academic and non-academic narrators

Most national British history has been written by white, middle-aged, middle class men. Fifty authors are considered here, and only four are women. Most were professionally engaged in the discipline of history either in school or university. Several were private scholars or independent writers, although fewer in more recent times. Through writing history for a general readership, they demonstrated their understanding of and commitment to the public pedagogic nature of their discipline. Present day historians such as Cannadine, Champion and Tosh continue to assert their belief in this responsibility.⁵⁵

More than two thirds of the authors were Oxbridge graduates and half of these were graduates of Oxford. Authors generally produce these popular histories many years after graduating. Oxford produced many more authors of popular national histories than Cambridge or elsewhere, perhaps because between the wars around 80% of students at Oxford studied humanities compared to around 55% at Cambridge.⁵⁶ It was not until the 1990s that the dominance of Oxford began to lessen. The writing of popular British history in the twentieth century was not the preserve of professional academic historians, although the authors studied here constitute half the total. A further eight of these authors were schoolteachers. Teaching history in a school was a spur to some to write their own histories. Using history as a means of instruction and communication thus came naturally to them. In so doing, they carried on a tradition of becoming teachers following study at Oxbridge, a tradition in which teaching was seen as a form of public service. An Oxford education at that time was intended to pass on 'humane learning to young men who would make their careers, not in academe but in public and professional life'.⁵⁷ Historians also moved between or combined occupations, for example Maude and Powell were MPs and independent scholars; Trevelyan spent many years as an independent scholar before returning to Cambridge as Regius Professor of History, and

⁵⁵ David Cannadine, 'Prologue: Making History, Now!' in *Making History Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies and Explorations* (Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 7; Justin Champion, 'What are historians for?' *Historical Research* vol 81 no 211 (February 2008) 167-71, 186; John Tosh, 'Why History Matters', <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-79.html#S6>

⁵⁶ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: OUP 1998) 249

⁵⁷ Jose Harris, Chapter 9 The Arts and Social Sciences 1939-1970 in *The History of the University of Oxford Volume VIII The Twentieth Century*, ed Brian Harrison, 218

Bowle moved from school to university teaching. Around a quarter were independent scholars and writers; however, as John Lukacs noted, private scholars as a group have almost disappeared.⁵⁸ Five were journalists and four were MPs (including Churchill). Half a dozen or so followed occupations such as publishing.

These historians largely shared an educational and class background, a background they also shared with politicians, civil servants, judges and bishops, whose views history was intended to form. Born between 1870 and the 1950s, their education reached back to earlier times. National history, usually called English history rather than British history, was the backbone of the school and university curriculum; less attention was given to what was called European history, and very little if any to American or Asian history. The idea prevailed, certainly in Oxford, that studying a long sweep of continuous national history was good training in historical practice and an appropriate education for future members of government, civil servants and broadcasters, who were going to shape or influence the nation's development. This idea was realised in the Oxford history curriculum, which required the study of the whole of English history. Those who went to university (the majority) or who later worked in academia practised their discipline in a particular sort of setting. The history they produced was a collective enterprise based in an institution, usually a university and was produced within a school of historiography with its own problems and approaches, and its writers were part of a social network. Some of the historians considered here knew each other socially as well as professionally, for example Trevelyan and Wingfield-Stratford.

Almost all these popular histories were written by men. For much of the period in which they were being written, there was overt discrimination against women (voting, employment, marriage) and racial minorities (colour bar). Britain continued to be actively engaged in wars and the exercise of political power on a global scale. This background and context contributed to constructing the nation in white, masculine, militaristic terms.

Some history for a mass audience is part of a particular ideological approach, for example the 'history from below' approach pioneered by E P Thompson and others. Both professional and radical history can be written for the public, as Jordanova pointed out.⁵⁹ Communist Party members used this approach as part of their mission to revolutionise society, for which a revised understanding of the British past as a yet-unfinished struggle for the emancipation of the working classes was an essential element (see Chapter 3 on A L Morton's *A People's*

⁵⁸ John Lukacs, 'Writing' (1990) *Remembered Past: John Lukacs on History, Historians, and Historical Knowledge*, ed Mark G Malvasi and Jeffrey O Nelson (ISI Books Wilmington Delaware 2005), 685

⁵⁹ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (Hodder Arnold 2006 2nd edition) footnote 2 chapter 6

History of England). Raphael Samuel, also a Marxist historian and member of the Communist Party until 1956, was a keen proponent of history for the public. He aimed to reach a wide audience through the History Workshop movement begun at Ruskin College Oxford in 1967 and attended by 'students, autodidact enthusiasts and professional historians', and through its conferences and journal. He tried to contribute, through press, radio and TV, to debates about the teaching of history in schools since he firmly believed that 'the direction taken by school history would do more to shape the public sense of history than any number of learned disputes amongst professionals'.⁶⁰

Since the 1980s, governments have been concerned about and wanted to prescribe the content of history taught in schools, generally wanting more British history to give its citizens an understanding of the national past. But perhaps governments worry too much. Several of the histories studied here, for instance those by Seaman and Bryant, were explicitly written for those who covered little history at school or who had forgotten what they learnt.⁶¹

Non-professional history is often more readable. Some relatively recent work by academic historians is pedestrian (Feiling, G N Clark, Ashley, Black) or has quirky rhetorical flourishes (White). Seaman, Hibbert, Bryant and Johnson are all very readable, as are histories by the modern professionals Briggs, Elton, Davies and Schama. Historians now write much better than in the past; they are more concerned to appeal. There are so many books people can read, and so many ways to learn about history other than by reading (film, TV, museums, 'heritage') that historians must and do make more effort to communicate their views accessibly.

The reception of popular history in the culture: readers and responses

Analysing texts and considering the background of authors of popular histories is only one aspect of considering the function of these books in the culture. A narrative has not only a story and a narrator but also an audience. But it is very difficult to get any information about who reads popular histories and what impact they may have had. A book may sell well but it is hard to gauge its effects. Collini referred to 'the sheer uncontrollability of readers' responses'.⁶²

⁶⁰ Alison Light, Sally Alexander and Gareth Stedman Jones, Preface to Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain, Theatres of Memory* vol II (Verso 1999)

⁶¹ Seaman, xix; Bryant *History of Britain and the British People* vol 1 *Set in a Silver Sea* (Grafton Books 1985) 16

⁶² Stefan Collini, 'Private Reading' in *Common Reading* (Oxford, OUP 2008) 250

Work on readers' responses and book history does not reveal much about the reaction to popular national history. There are several problems, and both Reba Soffer and Leslie Howsam have commented perceptively on them. Numbers sold do not, as is well known, equate to numbers of readers, nor can we usually know what sense readers made of what they read. Readers leave little or no comment about their views (although this is changing through readers' reviews for online booksellers). The professional review provides only one strand of the web of meaning such histories can create. Leslie Howsam wondered, 'What did readers remember or communicate about their experience of reading history? How did readings differ according to class, ethnicity or gender, and over time?', but she was unable to provide answers to these intriguing questions.⁶³

Publication and sales figures are available for some books; commentators frequently note the popularity of Trevelyan's *English Social History*, for instance.⁶⁴ Other writers sometimes refer to the histories by Trevelyan and Churchill, in contrast to some other histories that may have had a role in the nation's self-understanding when they were written but have left little subsequent trace. Publishers' archives contain little information on sales figures for earlier books and sales figures for more recent ones are not easily obtainable. Pricing is an issue too. G N Clark's book (1971) had a print run of 20,000 at what the *Oxford Mail* considered the 'bargain price of £2 for 580 pages'.⁶⁵ However, by the end of 1972 the OUP admitted that sales had not met their expectations.⁶⁶ Hamilton's *History of the Homeland* was another book that did not do as well as the publisher expected, as was Elton's *The English*.⁶⁷ Sometimes publishers misjudged the market.

However, some idea about the consumption of these histories can be inferred from looking at literacy rates, educational opportunities, developments in publishing, increased leisure and wider access to books. Literacy rates and educational opportunities helped to determine what was read and what was enjoyed. History as taught in schools was probably not particularly influential. David Vincent noted that instruction in the national story from school textbooks was ineffective. Classes were too big and pupils too inattentive.⁶⁸ Cannadine et al's work on the teaching of history in schools showed that there was wide variation in the content and

⁶³ Leslie Howsam, *Past into Print: the Publishing of History in Britain 1850-1950* (The British Library and the University of Toronto Press 2009) 121

⁶⁴ For example, Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (Profile Books 2002) 71

⁶⁵ John Grassi, *Oxford Mail* 20 May 1971

⁶⁶ Davin memo 29 September 1972 OUP Clark Survey archive

⁶⁷ John Davey, Editorial Director, Blackwells, to Elton 20 January 1994, Royal Historical Society, G R Elton correspondence *The English* Blackwells 1989-94

⁶⁸ David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (Polity Press Cambridge 2000) 133

style of history, echoing Vincent's comment.⁶⁹ Working class intellectuals, however, made considerable efforts to use and enjoy the expanding opportunities for reading that opened up. Collini noted that from around 1950/60 the autodidact tradition ended, and the audience for history changed, becoming more socially homogeneous.⁷⁰ He also argued that more people were in higher education, wanting a different kind of history, but in fact the number of students was still very small, representing only 3 to 4 percent of the age group.⁷¹

Two developments in particular helped to create greater readership: changes in book publishing, partly driven by technological innovations, and wider public access to books. Since publishers are commercial organisations producing books which they expect to sell well and therefore make them money, if they can produce books more cheaply this gives them an incentive to produce more titles and longer runs. Changes in book publishing practice give some clues about reading habits. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Dent, for example, invested in lengthy classics including Froude's *History of England* in 10 vols. The viability of this and similar publications 'speaks of a hunger for reading that was Asiatic in scale'.⁷² Thus we can assume some degree of popularity for these works, some appetite for them by the 'general reader'. Peter Mandler commented on how numbers of history titles published rose from around 350 a year in 1870 to around 900 just before the First World War but fell back after that to nearly 1870 levels by 1939. He suggested that the public began to regard history as offering just 'throwbacks to the taste of the previous generation'.⁷³ The growth of the paperback format, begun in the 1930s and hugely promoted by Allen Lane's Penguin imprint, brought books within the purchasing power of many more people. More recent technological developments such as computerisation, digital and electronic formats, and print on demand have all made book production easier, quicker and cheaper.

As well as being more swiftly and more cheaply produced, books became more widely read because they became increasingly available. Distribution and marketing helped greatly, as did the advent of libraries, both public and subscription, where books could be borrowed by those who did not want or could not afford to buy them. The Public Libraries Act of 1850 enabled councils to spend rate money on creating public libraries; by 1918 there were 456 library authorities in England. Public libraries were supplemented by subscription libraries, such as

⁶⁹ David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011) 194

⁷⁰ Stefan Collini, *Common Reading* (OUP Oxford 2008) 129

⁷¹ A H Halsey (ed), *British Social Trends Since 1900*, (Basingstoke, Hampshire, Macmillan Press 2nd edition 1988) Table 7.2

⁷² Collini, 251

⁷³ Mandler, *History and National Life*, 63-66

Mudies, Smiths, The Times Book Club and Boots.⁷⁴ The establishment of subscription libraries by booksellers and publishers provided a profitable undertaking and a social meeting place for the community. By the early 1960s the large London circulating libraries and local twopenny libraries had ceased to function. In 1964 the Libraries and Museums Act made public libraries more important in providing all kinds of books – ‘the national health service for books’. Small shops began to sell paperbacks. The creation of new ways and places to buy books – Amazon and other online bookshops, supermarket paperback sales – all make books more widely distributed and advertised, cheaper and easier to buy, hence accessible to the public. The market for reading generally, including for history is thereby expanded.

Throughout the century, publishers worked hard to promote sales through advertising, since they were, as Leslie Howsam pointed out, ‘facilitators and mediators of historical knowledge’, gatekeepers ‘between those who write and those who read’, who often commissioned history books.⁷⁵ Reba Soffer tells us that Bryant worked hard to popularise his books and promote his message.

To do this, he appealed to an electorate uncertain about party affiliation; he cultivated policy and opinion makers; and he courted those interested in exploring questions about human nature, society, character, nation, and religion. Audiences were created and maintained through a strenuous schedule of lectures to political clubs, self-betterment groups, and any assembly able to pay and willing to listen to him. There was no end to those able and willing.⁷⁶

It may be that these efforts contributed to the large sales of Bryant’s books (see chapter 6).

However, these observations do not help much; we are left with the problem on which Soffer has commented astutely:

Considerable time, energy, pseudo-science, and wishful thinking have been expended to demonstrate whether any kind of statement—oral, written, or graphic—ever reaches, let alone affects, the audiences for whom they were intended, either in their own time or in a later period. It is a further speculative leap to imagine what audiences wanted to hear, what they actually heard, and further still what they made of what they believed they heard. Even if some individuals really appreciated what they were meant to understand, can we determine whether their thinking or behavior was altered by such an understanding? In a written, spoken or pictorial effort to transmit ideas, the intention and purpose may be stated explicitly but the contents of the ideas may still be equivocal. Different kinds of audiences and different members of the same audience will find a variety of meanings, often inconsistent, in what they read, hear, or see.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1870-1918* (2006) 50, 58

⁷⁵ Howsam, 115, 117

⁷⁶ Reba N. Soffer, ‘Arthur Bryant, Britain’s Establishment Historian’ <http://hnn.us/articles/126981.html>

⁷⁷ Reba N. Soffer, ‘Arthur Bryant, Britain’s Establishment Historian’

Perusing these older histories today we are listening to two voices. We read, as do all readers, bringing our own knowledge and ideas to the text. But we also read hearing echoes of previous preoccupations and other questions so that we are in a sense overhearing an earlier conversation not originally meant for us.

CHAPTER 2 HISTORY FOR THE NEW CENTURY 1900-1918

- 1912 Innes, A D, *A History of the British Nation from Earliest Times to the Present Day* 2 vols, Rivingtons
- 1912 Pollard, A F, *The History of England: a study in political evolution*, Home University Library (Williams and Norgate)
- 1913 Wingfield-Stratford, E, *The History of English Patriotism*, 2 vols, John Lane, The Bodley Head
- 1913-15 Innes, A D, *A History of England and the British Empire* 4 vols Rivingtons
- 1917 Chesterton, G K, *A Short History of England*, Chatto and Windus

In England there was a tradition of telling the story of the nation nearly as old as the nation itself. From Bede in 731 through Gildas, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and on to Hume, Macaulay and John Richard Green, England's historians had told the nation's story. Other significant shapers of the national narrative included Francis Bacon's *Henry VII*, Harrington's *Oceana*, and Clarendon's *History of the Great Rebellion*. It is also possible to see Shakespeare's history plays as part of a national narrative.

National history for the public before 1900

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the history of England for the 'general reader' was almost uniformly political. Most history at the time was the history of the nation, taken by Ranke as the proper subject through which to study the past. History in England conformed to this pattern.¹ These accounts understood national history to be taking a particular direction, to have a purpose or end that it was intended to fulfil. The goal was constructed as the British parliamentary constitutional monarchy as it existed at the time of writing. Historians regarded this political system as the summit of political development. It was through parliamentary democracy and the rule of law that the British had reached a higher degree of liberty than other nations. Tracing lines of development and linking past and present were important features of this approach.² In providing their accounts, historians looked in the past for people and events that could be regarded as anticipating the present, and having found them, praised those who furthered progress towards the goal and criticised those who hindered it. National history in England/Britain was thus a complacent account of successful progress from earliest

¹ John Burrow *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Enquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (Penguin Books 2009) 456

² Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (Profile Books 2002)

times, via Magna Carta, the Reformation, the Glorious Revolution and the Reform Acts to the present.

While there was interest in telling the nation's history, by the beginning of the twentieth century little comprehensive history of England had been written. Historians had concentrated on shorter periods, on what seemed to them most important. The first work to cover English history comprehensively was by the French writer Rapin-Thoyras, who was a Huguenot, living in the Netherlands who had accompanied William III to England. His *L'Histoire d'Angleterre*, beginning with the Ancient British before the Roman Conquest and ending with Charles I, appeared in an English translation between 1726 and 1731.³ He explained his purpose in his dedication to George I:

The liberty which I take in offering this History of England to YOUR MAJESTY, is based uniquely on the nature of this Work, in which I have set myself the task of instructing Foreigners in the origin and the progressions of the English Monarchy... One will see clearly in this History, that the constant union of the Sovereign with his Parliament, is the most solid foundation for the glory of the Prince and the welfare of the Subjects.⁴

He wanted to explain how England had kept her ancient constitution and become powerful and united.⁵

Twenty years later, Hume's history rejected this interpretation, seeking to be impartial between Whig and Tory views of the seventeenth century conflict. Produced in six volumes between 1754 and 1761, and covering the period from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the reign of Charles I, Hume characterised the Tudor period as a time of almost arbitrary government, whereas Alfred and Magna Carta were celebrated. He did not continue the history to the reign of Queen Anne as he had originally planned. The first volume was called *The History of Great Britain*, but subsequent ones were entitled *The History of England*. Writing in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, John Robertson considered the history 'a remarkable testimony to the coherence of English history across its entire period, despite the evident changes which had occurred in its form of government'. However, he thought that Hume's 'change of title was an acknowledgement that the same story could not be written of Great Britain, or indeed of Scotland'.⁶ Even at this stage historians who sought to tell the story

³ John Kenyon, *The History Men*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1983), 39

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_de_Rapin [accessed 2 July 2012]

⁵ Hugh Trevor-Roper, Introduction to *Lord Macaulay, History of England*, (Harmondsworth Middlesex: Penguin English Library 1979), 10

⁶ ODNB on David Hume

of the nation struggled to identify usefully and coherently the nation about which they were writing.

The best-known and most influential historian of England writing in the nineteenth century was Macaulay. He saw parallels between the events of the seventeenth century and the two most significant events of his time: parliamentary reform in England, and the revolutions of 1848 in Europe.⁷ The events of 1688, in Macaulay's view, were the founding occurrences of the present balanced constitution that provided such felicity to the inhabitants of England. For Macaulay, as H A L Fisher noted, 'the more carefully the history of any past age is examined the more reason we have to congratulate ourselves that we live in the present.'⁸ As is well known, the work was extremely popular; the first two volumes sold well in Britain and also in America.⁹ Mandler commented that this national and patriotic story appealed to both the elite and the working class, and had sales similar to Dickens' or Scott's books.¹⁰

Several other major historians wrote on the history of England towards the end of the nineteenth century. Buckle produced in 1857 and 1861 only the first two volumes of his *History of Civilisation in England*. Intended to be a comparative study, deducing laws of historical progress and applying them to developments in England and other European states, only one chapter on England appeared. Buckle viewed England, as was common at the time, as a healthy nation, exceptional in its progress towards toleration and liberty. Like Macaulay, he hoped that his history would be widely read. The work was popular and successful, praised by Darwin and translated into French, German and Russian. However, it was also much criticised by the intelligentsia for being positivist (Lord Acton), insufficiently knowledgeable (Macaulay) and wanting to establish a science of history (Stubbs), and soon ceased to be generally read.¹¹ Freeman's work on the Norman Conquest created a narrative of continuity from the Saxon invasions onward, arguing that the Conquest did not represent a major break, an interpretation that remained influential in the accounts of English history into the twentieth century.¹² Stubbs, like Macaulay, characterised English history as a gradual and almost inevitable progress towards liberty. His approach differed in relying extensively on documents to support his argument; this approach encouraged the study of history as a good in itself, not simply for the lessons it could provide. Stubbs may not have been read by the general public,

⁷ John Burrow, 368-9

⁸ HAL Fisher, 'The Whig Historians', the Raleigh Lecture on History, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 1928 vol XIV, 24.

⁹ Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (Routledge 1999) 32

¹⁰ Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (Profile Books 2002) 35, 34

¹¹ Thomas Henry Buckle, *ODNB*; Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (Profile Books 2002) 42

¹² Edward Freeman, *ODNB*

but his *Constitutional History* was a significant interpretation of the course of English history which influenced generations of undergraduates.¹³ Seeley did not think of history as simply a good in itself, but more instrumentally as a school for statesmen. In *The Expansion of England* he sought to provide a guide to the development of an already existing tendency. England, he considered, had a tendency to expand 'as a power in the world; that destiny [he] divined... was the gathering together of the imperial components into a coherent entity, a "Greater Britain"'. The term 'Greater Britain' signified the role of Britain as world power of increasing importance. Britain's destiny as an imperial nation was of much more weight and esteem than the history of liberty and democracy.¹⁴ A characteristic attitude to national history at this time was to regard nations like organisms, borrowing an approach from Darwinism. Nations were thought of as having personalities and as living entities that 'required an evolutionary concept of change to reconcile permanence and development'. This, as Jann noted, was a Whig approach by which historians 'invoked natural growth and practical accommodation to sanction progress in uniquely English institutions'. It was Whig too in that it evaluated 'past events in terms of their contributions to the present's triumphant political balance'.¹⁵

Apart from Macaulay, these works did not provide easily accessible history for the public. One history that did so was John Richard Green's *Short History of the English People*, published in 1874. Green's history was hugely successful, selling 32,000 copies in the first year of publication (1874) and 500,000 in later years.¹⁶ As Cannadine notes, it was not superseded as the most widely read English history until Trevelyan's *History of England* appeared in 1926, and was still being read by students in the 1950s.¹⁷ Green wrote a different kind of national history that had been the subject of earlier histories. Like Freeman, Green thought the Anglo-Saxons particularly freedom loving, but the main thrust of his history, in an account that valued social and cultural aspects, was the continuous struggle of the English people to achieve liberty. Its appeal, as Mandler points out, was that of 'a smoothly flowing story with a strong narrative structure that was yet full of character and incident'.¹⁸ Green's work did not lead to historians developing the social and cultural aspects of English history. Although very appealing to non professionals, his apparent lack of archival sources and his lack of emphasis on traditional

¹³ William Stubbs, *ODNB*; Mandler, 37-8

¹⁴ John Seeley, *ODNB*

¹⁵ Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Ohio State University Press, Columbus USA 1985) xxi, xxvii

¹⁶ Anthony Brundage, *the People's Historian: John Richard Green and the Writing of History in Victorian England* (Greenwood Press Westport CT, USA 1994) 1

¹⁷ David Cannadine, 'Nation' in *Making History Now and Then*, (Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 175; Mandler, 40

¹⁸ Mandler, 40

institutions provoked criticism from professional historians who were in the process of transforming the study of history from a literary to a scholarly pursuit.¹⁹

Significant changes occurred in the practice of history in England from the end of the nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Second World War. History shared in the general specialisation and professionalisation of intellectual life in the period before the First World War.²⁰ The foundation of the Royal Historical Society in 1868, the creation of the *English Historical Review* in 1886, and the formation of the Historical Association in 1906 to support the teaching of history, particularly in schools, together with the adoption of the PhD research degree in 1917 created the institutional and organisational framework within which history could develop as a profession. History was established as a separate university subject at Oxford in 1872 and at Cambridge in 1875, although there was great stress on factual knowledge and little on interpretation or original study until Tout provided for a special subject to be studied from original sources for the new history school at Manchester, while Firth attempted unsuccessfully to introduce a similar study at Oxford.²¹ This development of history as a university subject helped towards the professionalisation of the discipline, although not all professors supported this trend. Some, e.g. Acton, still thought history was principally part of a humane and moral education. Trevelyan considered that 'the value and object of history is to a very large extent – I should say mainly – to educate the public mind'.²² Professional historians came to think that their role was to increase historical knowledge and communicate their finding to their fellow professionals. Jann pointed out that the Victorian was 'the last age in which the historian could expect to command the attention of a large and relatively homogeneous audience of educated general readers and to rest his authority on his ability to teach and uplift rather than on his advance of historical knowledge'.²³

The purpose of study for the growing numbers of history students was not to become professional historians, but to acquire a liberal education, often to fit them for some kind of public service.²⁴ Shannon called Oxford and Cambridge: 'essentially seminaries of

¹⁹ Brundage, 3

²⁰ G R Searle, *A New England? Peace and War 1886-1918*, New Oxford History of England, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003) 657.

²¹ Searle, 650-52, 654; Peter Slee *Learning and a liberal education: the study of modern history in the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) 42, 75

²² G M Trevelyan, 'History and the Reader' Third Annual Lecture of the National Book League 1945, in *An Autobiography and Other Essays* (Longmans 1949), 56

²³ Jann, xxvi

²⁴ G R Searle, 654-55

statesmanship', training the elite for government.²⁵ Soffer argues that teaching, both at university and school, was also regarded as a form of public service, and notes that a number of history graduates from Oxford and London combined teaching with other work in their subsequent careers.²⁶ History graduates outside Oxford and Cambridge often entered teaching, although information is hard to obtain and what there is has been variously interpreted and debated.²⁷

In part, the professionalisation of history was connected to the emergence of mass culture: specialisation was a way to mark off serious scholarship from the 'dumbing down' influence of the popular market.²⁸ Popular history was, according to Seeley, corrupted or adulterated: 'History only becomes interesting to the general public by being corrupted, by being adulterated with sweet, unwholesome stuff to please the popular palate.'²⁹ Supporters of literary history such as Augustine Birrell, Andrew Lang and Hugh Crothers defended it as having practical application in a readable style.³⁰ For Victorians, this was what gave history its authority and stature. But to many it seemed that professional historians in the first decades of the twentieth century, in turning to the needs of other historians rather than general readers, were increasingly abrogating their proper cultural role.³¹

In the later part of the nineteenth century there were three main reasons why more attention was being paid to the nature of the nation. First, as Mandler describes, developments in communications – transport and print with little censorship – encouraged a sense of unity in the 'imagined community'.³² Second, the parliamentary reform movement that encouraged Macaulay generated interest in national British/English history.³³ However, this demand also stimulated fears of socialism unleashed by mass electorates. Such fears help explain why some historians (Wingfield-Stratford and his friend, G M Trevelyan) were lukewarm about the extension of the franchise and no longer viewed the Westminster parliament as the 'fount of liberty'.³⁴ Continuing debates about the role of the House of Lords and the desirable extent of the suffrage contributed to disputes about the forms and structures of the British state. Third,

²⁵ Shannon, *The Crisis of Imperialism 1870-1915* (Paladin 1976) 300

²⁶ Reba N Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History, and the Making of an English Elite, 1870-1930* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1994) 184, 201-2

²⁷ Debate between Reba Soffer and Peter Slee in *The Historical Journal* 1987-8

²⁸ Jann, 219

²⁹ Quoted in Jann, 220

³⁰ Jann, 222

³¹ Jann, xxviii

³² Mandler 19-20

³³ Mandler 36

³⁴ Burrow 422

although, as Robbins points out, the Victorians assumed that the 1801 union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was the final formation, this union had never been fully accepted in Ireland and had been questioned and challenged.³⁵ The debates about Home Rule had raised afresh the composition of the nation-state in the two islands of Britain and Ireland. The Boer War had stimulated concerns about the role of the empire and the quality of the soldiers who had to defend it. The response was the development of pro-imperial sentiment in the form of jingoism on the one hand, and the 'Little Englandism' reaction on the other, with moderate ideas in between. The existence of and the increase in the extent of empire raised further questions about whether and to what extent the British who had left to live in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada were still British or had become something else.³⁶ Another way to understand writing national history in terms of national greatness is that it resulted from a sense that other nations, Germany and the USA, were beginning to overtake Britain economically, and challenge Britain's world dominant role.

Pre-First World War histories

Three pre-First World War narratives continued in the style of earlier Victorian multi-volume works. However, one of the first histories of England to be published in the twentieth century was *A School History of England* by C R L Fletcher, who wrote the text, and Rudyard Kipling who wrote the verses.³⁷ Writing in *The American Historical Review* a contributor commented, 'It appears that in certain weeks of the autumn the bestselling book in England has been the history of England prepared for ingenuous youth by Mr C R L Fletcher and Mr Rudyard Kipling, the latter contributing verses of undoubted merit and patriotic intention, the former a narrative praised by all Tory journals.'³⁸ The book was issued in two different formats: a large, illustrated history of England (5000 copies) and a cheap 'school' version (25,000 copies).³⁹ So meritorious and patriotic were Kipling's verses that they still resonated with the public sixty years on when they formed part of a BBC series on Kipling's English history (see Chapter 7).

³⁵ Keith Robbins, 'An imperial and multinational polity: The 'scene from the centre', 1832-1922', in *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History*, ed Alexander Grant and Keith Stringer, (Routledge 1995) 244

³⁶ G R Searle, 22

³⁷ C R L Fletcher (1857-1934) tutor at Magdalen College Oxford, Clarendon Press delegate; one of the authors of *Why We Are at War: Great Britain's Case* (1914)

³⁸ *AHR* Vol 17, No 2 (Jan 1912) 426

³⁹ Peter Keating, 'The River's Tale', New Readers Guide to the Works of Rudyard Kipling http://www.kipling.org.uk/rg_riverstale1.htm

The two works by A D Innes (*A History of the British Nation*, 1912 and *A History of England and the British Empire*, 1913-15) and the one by Wingfield-Stratford (*The History of English Patriotism*, 1913) concentrated on relating events and did little to explain their overall significance in relation to an overarching theme.⁴⁰ Innes's two histories had a clear sense of British destiny and mission, focusing on the development of parliamentary government and control of the monarchy, together with British wars against the French and the development of British rule in India. He constructed the subject of his histories widely. However, even in 1916 a reviewer implicitly criticised this approach, looking 'forward to the time when Scotland will be fairly regarded by English historians as of the British Empire', showing awareness of the multi-national nature of the United Kingdom and its empire.⁴¹ In his *History of England and the British Empire* Innes defended the Anglo-centric approach of the first volume because before 1485 'the history is practically a history of England, in which the subordination of Ireland and Wales and the development of Scotland play only a minor part'.⁴² He included the Celtic fringe in the later volumes, and, as in other works, the American colonies and India. But he was careful to point out that he understood the difference between England and Britain and tried to use the names correctly.⁴³ By including some material on the history of the empire, and on Scotland, Wales and Ireland, Innes indicated that the extent of empire, and the future of Ireland within the United Kingdom, were aspects of national history of particular concern to his expected readers.

Wingfield-Stratford's book was more idiosyncratic. The theme of his *History of English Patriotism* was the development of loyalty to England out of many different loyalties, loyalty shown in love of country uniting past and present and leading to a form of divine love. Combining liberty and order enabled England to become the only nation to have solved the problem of liberty and empire.⁴⁴ Part of the answer lay in England's being a Protestant country. Wingfield-Stratford used his historical work to make comments on the present and to look into the future. Commenting on the fifteenth century, he noted that, since the key to England's position in Europe lay in the Low Countries, some foresaw that 'another and even sterner conflict awaits us if we are to secure the independence of these countries – and our own'.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Arthur Donald Innes (1863-1938) Oriel College Oxford; Tudor specialist; author of many school textbooks; Esmé Wingfield-Stratford (1882-1971) King's College Cambridge and LSE; private scholar and prolific author of poetry and polemics as well as history

⁴¹ Review of Arthur Innes *A History of England and the British Empire* in *The American Political Science Review* vol 10 no 2 part 1 (May 1916) 376-77

⁴² Innes, *A History of England and the British Empire* vol 1 (Rivingtons 1913) v

⁴³ Innes, *A History of England and the British Empire* vol 4, vi

⁴⁴ Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, *The History of English Patriotism* (John Lane The Bodley Head 1913) vol I, 105-6

⁴⁵ Wingfield-Stratford, *The History of English Patriotism*, vol I, 61

The romantic and exaggerated language encouraged the perception of English exceptionalism. It is an exclusively English nation about which he was writing.

Although Pollard's work was very different in style – very short (it was written for the Home University Library) and with much more emphasis on interpretation – it shared Whig features with the other two histories.⁴⁶ By calling his work *A Study in Political Evolution* Pollard signalled the construction of the nation as a developing organism, and a conception of English history as unfolding towards a destination, the present, which had so much to commend it. What has evolved, claimed Pollard, is 'a great empire, which has often conquered others, out of the little island which was often conquered itself'.⁴⁷ The sovereignty of parliament had also evolved, to be parliamentary and representative, making government 'an affair of the people'. Civil liberties were now open to all faiths. 'The common end and object towards which men of all parties in English history have striven through the growth of conscious and collective action [is that of] securing for the individual adequate opportunities for that development of his individuality by which alone he can render his best service to the community.' For Pollard, the goal of national history had been the step-by-step extension by the state 'to all sorts and conditions of men a share in the exercise of its power. This is the real English conquest, and it forms the chief content of English history.'⁴⁸ Pollard selected events to shed light on how we got to our wonderful present, which received a peroration in the last chapter. His England evolves into the nation existing in 1912, the best of all possible nations. His view of the Tudors, particularly their parliaments, foreshadowing his 1920 work on the evolution of parliament, was different from the usual one suggested by Stubbs: he regarded the Tudors as constructing a strong state, not diminishing the achievements of earlier gained liberty. Rather Pollard considered a strong state necessary to give effect to the will of the people and help secure liberty through measures to create a more humane society.

The key themes of these works are the growth of parliamentary government and the provisions of common law; the resistance to absolutism; the triumph of Protestantism all contributing to a version of national history that privileges its English origins, its Protestantism, and its beneficent overseas rule. The Empire, created by enterprise and hard work, provided the forum for English mission and destiny, exporting national values and ideas world-wide. As Valerie Chancellor points out, growing nationalism and growing awareness of the development

⁴⁶ Albert Frederick Pollard (1869-1948) founder of the Historical Association and of the Institute of Historical Research

⁴⁷ A F Pollard, *The History of England: A Study in Political Evolution* (Home University Library, Williams and Norgate, 1912) chapter 1

⁴⁸ Pollard chapter IX English Democracy

of other countries encouraged a stress on national greatness and the benefits of empire.⁴⁹ The emphasis is all on England's past greatness and its expected continuance in the future. These themes did not disappear from popular national history after the First World War, but were modified under its impact.

The writing of history, both professional and amateur, was interrupted by the war. Many historians served either in the military or in intelligence. Innes continued work on his *History of England and the British Empire* (he was too old for active service). The outbreak of war was a professional challenge for historians: those who worked in universities cultivated objectivity and reliance on documentary evidence, yet within six weeks, pamphlets which can only be described as propaganda began to come from their pens and continued for much of the war. Starting with *Why We Are At War: Great Britain's Case* the Oxford Pamphlets on the war series was intended 'for the intelligent working man' and sought to 'provide useful information on the War' especially to those 'who do not buy books of reference' on grounds of cost.⁵⁰ These pamphlets sold at 1d, 2d or 3d at most. They were distributed to schools, universities, military institutions, educational clubs and associations, and to private individuals.⁵¹ Their aim was to place the responsibility for the war firmly on Germany, to explain Britain's actions before the war and to characterise the war as a clash of ideologies: liberal idealism and democracy against militarism and aggression. It also portrayed Britain's actions as consonant with the principles that had guided it in the past. The high sales of pamphlets is some indication of their influence. Von Strandmann claimed that during the First World War, 'In the campaign for the minds of the British people the Oxford Pamphlets and the millions of others played a significant role.'⁵² One wartime best seller originated in a series of lectures (*The War and Democracy* 1915). Other books also were inspired by lectures.⁵³ As Keith Robbins has pointed out, the public wanted an explanation of the origins of the war and for historians not to have provided it would have been to fail in their role as public intellectuals.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Valerie E Chancellor, *History for their Masters: Opinion in the English History textbook 1800-1914* (Adams and Dart, Bath 1970) 141

⁵⁰ Stuchtey, *British and German Historiography 1750-1950: traditions, perceptions and transfers*, ed Benedikt Stuchtey and Peter Wende (OUP 2000) 353

⁵¹ Hartmut Pogge von Strandman, 'The Role of British and German Historians in Mobilizing Public Opinion in 1914' in *British and German Historiography 1750-1950: traditions, perceptions and transfers*, ed Benedikt Stuchtey and Peter Wende (OUP 2000) 359

⁵² Von Strandmann, 363

⁵³ Stuart Wallace, *War and the Image of Germany: British Academics 1914-1918* (John Donald Publishers Ltd Edinburgh 1988) 168, 169

⁵⁴ Keith Robbins, 'History, Historians and British Public Life' in *History, Religion and Identity in Modern Britain* (The Hambledon Press 1993) 19

An alternative narrative: Chesterton's Catholic history

The generally accepted national narrative was challenged in the middle of the war by a popular patriotic history of a very different kind. G K Chesterton had already risen to the task of writers in wartime by producing two wartime propaganda pamphlets: 'The Barbarism of Berlin', 1914, and 'The Crimes of England', 1915. In these Chesterton portrayed a conflict of civilisation and barbarism and encouraged a view of England as Christian and mythic.⁵⁵ His *Short History* arose in response to a request from his publishers to provide a book to replace a commission he could no longer fulfil, although he had previously refused the request saying he was no historian.⁵⁶ Chesterton's approach was unusual. He aimed to write a history free of the bias of professional historians. In his view, writers like Macaulay and J R Green were misguided because they did not understand that the deeper truth of the English past lay in myths and legends, not in 'objective' accounts.⁵⁷ In his *TLS* review, Pollard criticised Chesterton's failure to understand historical method and disregard for historical truth, commenting, '...to Mr Chesterton the distortion is the reality...the fiction that is believed is more vital than the fact'.⁵⁸

In constructing this alternative version of English history Chesterton was drawing on a widely read Catholic version. Lingard's *History of England* was one of the standard histories of England for Oxford undergraduates at the end of the nineteenth century (along with J R Green's history).⁵⁹ As such, it must have had an effect on that first generation of undergraduates who studied history as a university subject. Lingard's sympathies are clear.⁶⁰ He intends to write history that will be acceptable to Protestants while correcting misapprehensions about the role of Catholicism in English history: for example, he states that claims of abuses being found in monasteries in the sixteenth century, and used as justification for their dissolution, had been shown to be lies, but that the real truth was now emerging.⁶¹ In his eyes, the Catholic version is closer to true history.

⁵⁵ Julia Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism and Nationhood: The England of G K Chesterton* (Lexington Books, Lanham Maryland USA 2009) 152-53

⁵⁶ Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (Sheed and Ward 1943) 416

⁵⁷ Stapleton, *Chesterton* 3

⁵⁸ A F Pollard review in *TLS* 22 November 1917

⁵⁹ Kenyon, 185; Peter Slee, *Learning and a liberal education: the study of modern history in the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester 1800-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1986), 41.

⁶⁰ Revd John Lingard (1771-1851) Catholic historian and parish priest, *History of England* (1819-30), multiple editions and updates

⁶¹ J Lingard, *Lingard's History of England*, newly abridged and brought down to the accession of King Edward VII by Dom Henry Birt (London, 1918) 321

Chesterton intended his history to follow this example and help to set the record straight. The theme of his account is English liberty under true religion and the freedom of individuals and families to make their own society and associations, such as guilds, without interference from the state. Christianity provided the environment in which a civilised society could develop. This was his explanation for the end of what he called slavery – serfdom – in England in the fourteenth century.⁶² The Middle Ages were the source of a revolution in which the people gained great things that they had now lost.⁶³ We were now in another battle for liberty with the barbarians, but it was the German systems of social discipline that most threatened the liberties of the English. If these systems were to take over, it might be better for the English to be defeated, dying for liberty!

Chesterton challenged commonly held assumptions about the nature of the church in England: that it had always been national and separate from Rome; that papal authority was resented, and that contemporaries experienced the Reformation as an assertion of traditional English liberties. England's true origins lay in being part of Catholic Christendom. The Reformation was not the beginning of the development of English liberties but the point at which the fortunes of the English people began to decline. The Catholic narrative promoted the conviction that England would be a better place had it continued to adhere to Catholicism, and encouraged a romantic nostalgia for a 'merrie' England of guilds, villages, independent craftsmen and sturdy peasants. It also challenged the usual view of parliament as the defender of English freedom; Chesterton rather took the view that parliament betrayed it.⁶⁴ This revisionist understanding of the national narrative was in direct contrast to the commonly given version in which parliament is the key institution guaranteeing English liberty.

Chesterton's book was received favourably by many, including some who might not have been expected to praise it, such as the *New Statesman*, which called it 'an essay on the English which has all the fire and finish of a poem'. His thesis was 'a fairly complete reversal of what is usually taught in schools'. *Everyman* also understood Chesterton's poetic and inspirational approach, calling it 'a fascinating narrative but hardly a history...a trifle which is still the most valuable book produced during the war'.⁶⁵

⁶² Chesterton, 91

⁶³ Chesterton, 3

⁶⁴ Chesterton, 103

⁶⁵ Stapleton, 175; *New Statesman* 27 October 1917; *Everyman* 9 November 1917

Conclusion

Although the English had a long tradition of telling the nation's story, only a few narratives of major importance were produced before the twentieth century: Hume in the eighteenth and Macaulay and John Richard Green in the nineteenth. Other national history that had a narrower focus shared with Macaulay and Green a traditional story of progress towards parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and the civilising mission of the British Empire. Although this (Whig) interpretation linked the expansion of the suffrage to earlier developments in the 1832 Reform Act and, even earlier, to the 1688 Revolution, a vast electorate seemed to pose risks of rule by – or at least in the interests of – the masses. The traditional narrative thus became harder to sustain.⁶⁶ Historians continued the approach of looking in the past for the seeds of the present and for admiring or criticising people insofar as they anticipated or hindered the development of liberty with order. And they continued to celebrate resistance to absolutism and the identification of Protestantism with England. The pre-First World War works responded to the concerns about British military superiority and social provision by continuing to write an imperialist and triumphalist version of national history.

Indeed the nation was thought of as 'England' in spite of its political structure comprising England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Both Hume's and Macaulay's histories were Anglo-centric. Pollard wrote only about England. Wingfield-Stratford's *English Patriotism* was very Anglo-centric. Innes included aspects of Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the empire but was criticised for marginalising Scotland. These historians were struggling to define the nation satisfactorily or to present and defend the delimitations they adopted. This uncertainty about what the nation was and who its inhabitants were remained an issue for national historians of Britain throughout the twentieth century.

The professionalisation of history opened up a gap between amateur and academic or professional historians. Some historians were no longer so keen to fill their earlier role of public intellectual, cultural critic and respected authority. An exception was G M Trevelyan, who moved out of academia, resigning his fellowship at Trinity College Cambridge in 1903 and into the wider cultural milieu of London. His output after the move comprised *England Under the Stuarts* (1904) and the Garibaldi books (1907-11) as well as poetry, following these after

⁶⁶ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill: Private Scholars, Public Culture and the Crisis of British Liberalism 1900-1939* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press 1996) 9

the war with *Britain in the Nineteenth Century*, in 1922 and, in 1926, *History of England*. He returned to Cambridge in 1927 on his appointment as Regius Professor.⁶⁷ However, he always considered communicating historical knowledge and interpretation to the public a duty and a privilege. Of the historians writing national history before 1914, Pollard (who wrote only a very short book) was an academic historian, but Wingfield-Stratford, having been at LSE before the war, took advantage of his private means after his war service to adopt the life-style of a private scholar. Innes's situation is unclear. Chesterton is an early example of the amateur historian. At the beginning of the century history was written by academics, professional private historians and by amateurs, a mixture that continued during the century.

The First World War made historians more aware of their role as cultural authorities. They quickly accepted this position, working rapidly to present a rationale for Britain's part in the conflict. Historians took advantage of the opportunity provided by the war to portray Germany as an aggressor and Britain as the champion of freedom, forced to fight to protect weaker nations such as Belgium, and the war as a clash of ideologies: liberal idealism and democracy against militarism and aggression. They also characterised Britain's actions as consistent with its national ideals. In spite of the war, the liberal narrative survived, with ideas about Britain's civilising mission in the Empire intact.

⁶⁷ David Cannadine, *G M Trevelyan: A Life in History* (Fontana Press 1993) 14, 16

CHAPTER 3 HISTORY BETWEEN THE WARS 1918-1939

Works studied:

- 1926 Trevelyan, G M, *History of England*, Longmans
- 1928 Wingfield-Stratford, Esmé, *The History of British Civilisation*, Routledge
- 1930 Sellar, W C, and Yeatman, R J, *1066 And All That*, Methuen
- 1931 Williamson, J A, *The Evolution of England: a Commentary on the Facts*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- 1932 Carrington, C E, and Jackson J Hampden, *History of England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- 1934 Belloc, Hilaire, *A shorter history of England*, Harrap
- 1935 Fisher, Mrs H A L (Lettice Fisher), *An introductory history of England and Europe from the earliest times to the present day*, Gollancz
- 1935 Murphy, Eileen, *Our last two thousand years. An Irishwoman's history of England*, Lovat, Dickson and Thompson
- 1938 Hearnshaw, F J C, *Outlines of the History of the British Isles*, Harrap
- 1938 Morton, A L, *A People's History of England*, Victor Gollancz
- 1939 Wingfield-Stratford, *The Foundations of British Patriotism*, Routledge

After the war, no history of the nation appeared for eight years. Between 1930 and 1940 there were eight (nine if *1066 And All That* is included). Mandler suggested that the war made many dissatisfied with the cultural certainties of the past, particularly with 'sentimental nationalism'.¹ The relationship of Ireland to Great Britain was unfinished business at the end of the war; by 1922 the business was finished and the United Kingdom comprised only Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Histories written after this tended to construct the nation to include Ireland even less than was the case in pre First World War accounts. Losing their earlier intellectual connection with German historical scholarship, British historians found themselves concentrating much more on their own history.² But they now had to consider how to tell the story of a nation that had been successful in war but for which the cost was enormous. Bentley describes historians, aware of the conflict's impact across Europe, facing both 'cultural despair in the face of a dead civilisation' and 'a determination to make history say something different for the post-war generation'.³ Belloc wrote Catholic history and Morton wrote Marxist history to provide different interpretations.⁴ By the end of the 1930s some historians, such as Lettice

¹ Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (Profile Books 2002) 60-61

² Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism 1870-1970* (Cambridge CUP 2005), 83

³ Bentley, *Modernizing*, 104

⁴ Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953) Balliol College Oxford; MP; journalist and Catholic writer; A L Morton (1903-1987) Cambridge University; teacher at Summerhill School; Communist journalist

Fisher and Wingfield-Stratford, were responding to the threat of another European war by issuing explicit warnings.⁵

Response to the First World War

The war had caused disruption to the teaching of history in universities as lecturers and students fought in the war. Of 12 authors whose works are considered here, half are known to have seen service in the war. (Lettice Fisher as a woman did not serve; Trevelyan was with the Red Cross, Morton and Jackson were too young.) However, historical work continued: for example, the Creighton Lecture series (an annual lecture established by bequest honouring historian Bishop Mandell Creighton) maintained its programme (unlike during the Second World War when the series was suspended) and the topics reflected contemporary concerns, with C H Firth's lecture in 1917 comparing the present war with that against Napoleon.⁶ Trevelyan was invited to give the lecture in 1919, marking a significant recognition of his standing as a historian. In it he wanted to remind his listeners that 'Englishmen should remember that they had the greatest record of ordered progress in the world'.⁷

The first comprehensive history of the nation to appear after the First World War was that by Trevelyan in 1926. In it he developed the theme of English exceptionalism to which he had referred in his Creighton lecture. Following his highly successful Lowell lectures on English history at Harvard, Trevelyan's publishers, Longmans, commissioned the *History of England*; the dedication is to 'President Lowell of Harvard'. Trevelyan is not sure whether to describe it as an essay or as a textbook. Most reviewers thought it was an essay as its approach was not that of a textbook, although Trevelyan himself thought it could be a textbook 'in so far as it preserves the narrative form in brief, deals in dates, and gives prominence to leading events and persons'. At 732 pages it was long to be regarded as an essay. However, the main purpose of the work was to 'analyze the social development of the nation in relation to economic conditions, political institutions, and overseas activities'.⁸ Trevelyan's conception of English history was that 'In answer to the instincts and temperament of her people, she evolved in the

⁵ Lettice Fisher (1875-1956) Somerville College Oxford; tutor in history, St Hugh's College Oxford; Esmé Wingfield-Stratford (1882-1971) King's College Cambridge; private scholar

⁶ Robert Evans, 'The Creighton Century: British historians and Europe, 1907-2007' in *The Creighton Century 1907-2007* ed David Bates, Jennifer Wallis and Jane Winters, (Institute of Historical Research 2009) 6, 20

⁷ Joseph M Hernon Jr, 'The Last Whig Historian and Consensus History: George Macaulay Trevelyan, 1876-1962', *AHR* vol 81 no 1 (February 1976) 79

⁸ Trevelyan, *History of England* (Longmans 1926) Preface

course of centuries a system which reconciled three things that other nations have often found incompatible – executive efficiency, popular control, and personal freedom.⁹

Sales of the *History of England* were high, as were sales of Belloc, Lytton Strachey, and H G Wells.¹⁰ Trevelyan's book sold 30,000 copies in the first year of publication and 200,000 by 1949.¹¹ 'No comprehensive, single volume *History of England* of any merit had been published for over fifty years, since J R Green had written his *History of the English People* (1874).' So wrote J H Plumb in 1951.¹² His view was that Trevelyan's history stood comparison with Green's, an evaluation often made since, for example by Cannadine.¹³ The prestige of Trevelyan's work eclipsed the work of the pre-First World War historians A D Innes and Wingfield-Stratford whose comprehensive histories in a more Victorian mode had much less appeal than Trevelyan's. Large numbers of reviews and references by later historians to the work all attest to Trevelyan's prestige and influence.

Less popular and less influential was the account that Wingfield-Stratford produced in 1928, *The History of British Civilisation*. Some 2250 copies of the first edition were printed in February 1928 and 2130 in October 1931.¹⁴ He does not explain why he produced a further history after his pre-war book. In this work there is more emphasis on literature and culture and on social history than in his earlier book. In its review *The Times* considered it 'a serious challenge' to J R Green's *Short History*. In fact, the reviewer thought it had 'the surer vision, the broader serenity' and benefits from the historical work undertaken in the intervening half-century.¹⁵ As R B Mowat, reviewing the book, noted, 'The author ends with the idea that, as the British commonwealth is knit together by spiritual bonds, in it probably are "the fairest hopes of mankind...The very League is but an attempt to apply British principles on a world-wide scale"'.¹⁶

⁹ Trevelyan, *History*, xix

¹⁰ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill: Private Scholars, Public Culture and the Crisis of British Liberalism, 1900-1939* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA, University of North Carolina Press 1996) 151

¹¹ Figures quoted in Feske, 140

¹² J H Plumb, *G M Trevelyan* (London, Biographical Supplement to 'British Book News' on Writers and Their Work, Longmans 1951) 24

¹³ David Cannadine, 'Nation: British Politics, British History and British-ness' in *Making History Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies and Explanations* ed idem (Basingstoke Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 175

¹⁴ Archives of Routledge and Kegan Paul, UCL Special Collections, RKP publishing journal vol 23g

¹⁵ *The Times* 2 November 1928, 21

¹⁶ R B Mowat, *EHR* vol 44 no 176 (October 1929) 667

Concept of the nation

Only Wingfield-Stratford and Hearnshaw writing in this period called their books anything other than histories of England. Hearnshaw was unusual in thinking of the nation as Britain, as consisting of four separate polities that together make up a larger entity. The other historians considered here privileged England. Although Scotland, Wales and Ireland were mentioned, the focus was always on their relations with England; just as with the history of the Empire, it was only when events in these countries affected those of England that they were treated. This was true even of those histories with 'Britain' or 'British' in their title. National history was conceived from the perspective of England. J A Williamson asserted that although 'after 1707 we speak of the British nation...it is still in the main the evolution of England that we must follow' because 'since the Union the predominant partner has been England'.¹⁷ In the *History of the British Empire*, Innes argued that the English now were in a direct line of descent from the original English of the fifth century, although this group was clearly labelled as consisting of Anglo-Saxon, Viking, Danish and Norman elements. The idea of the essential ethnic origins of the English as lying in northwest Europe could be expanded to include Germans (who were eligible for Rhodes scholarships) and the English speaking Americans.¹⁸ The creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 did not completely solve the question of the relationship that should exist between Ireland and Great Britain. Nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales showed that the issue had not gone away in respect of those countries either. Although some works contained material on Scotland, Wales and Ireland, the focus of attention remained England. Historians continued to treat the component parts separately, and there was no attempt, apart from Hearnshaw's, to integrate them and write a history of a different entity, Britain.

Hearnshaw included all four nations in his history but did not explore their inter-relations as much as write parallel histories, moving between each place.¹⁹ He observed that while there were many histories of the separate parts of the British Isles, there was 'not a single one that takes as its subject the British Isles as a whole and endeavours to pay equal attention to all the

¹⁷ J A Williamson (1886-1964) University of London; schoolteacher; Ford's lecturer University of Oxford 1939; maritime historian. J A Williamson, *The evolution of England: a commentary on the facts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1931), 283, 282

¹⁸ G R Searle, *A New England? Peace and War 1886-1918* (Oxford OUP) 30; Rhodes Scholarships were endowed by Cecil Rhodes in 1901 to 'develop outstanding leaders' from the British Empire, the United States and Germany. He included these places so that 'an understanding between the three great powers will render war impossible and educational relations make the greatest tie'.

<http://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/page/about>

¹⁹ F J C Hearnshaw (1896-1946) conservative medieval historian; Professor of History at Southampton; later at King's College London; also wrote textbooks; keen to reach wide audiences (source: Reba N. Soffer, *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America*; chapter 2 Conservatism as a Crusade: F. J. C. Hearnshaw, OUP 2009)

four main parts'.²⁰ However, Hearnshaw promised more than he delivered, although in respect of the four nations he did acknowledge how difficult he found it to 'co-ordinate them and view them synoptically', a difficulty experienced by later historians who tried this approach (see chapter 8). When successful, he noted 'many important and illuminating interconnexions'. Most of the examples he gave are medieval (he was principally a medievalist) but he also observed that 'the civil wars of the seventeenth century are unintelligible unless they are viewed in relation to all the four parts of the Britannic islands'.²¹

As Hearnshaw worked his way through the centuries, each chapter had a section on Scotland and Wales and often Ireland. But the sections were separate, treating events side by side. Hearnshaw's conception of Britain was different from that of historians writing in the 1990s. He noted that 'the constitution of the British Isles is in process of transformation'. At the time of his writing, he noted that its people were concerned with grievances; but when they realised where their interests actually lay, 'the whole of the British Isles, together with the vast British Empire which lies around them beyond the seas, will be bound together by lasting ties of federal amity'.²² To be British then was to belong to the empire as well as to the whole of Britain and Ireland – a mixture of complex and confusing political and geographical identities. While praising Hearnshaw's welcome 'effort to survey history from the standpoint of international contacts and influences' N D Emerson noted that it fell short of the ideal.²³ However it would be valuable for 'those who want to know the history of the British Isles rather than the isolated histories of the four nations'.²⁴

Historians persisted in using the term 'England' more frequently than 'Britain'. The term 'England' may have seemed more historical, more romantic, more enduring; perhaps, as Benedikt Stuchtey, who also pointed out this usage, suggested, it was to show 'England's superiority and singularity'.²⁵ As far as these historians were writing about state formation, they used the name of the part to stand for the whole, reflecting a view of national development that saw England incorporating other nations into the state which it dominated.

As well as incorporating other nations within its borders, England/Britain also created an empire. Historians generally seemed to be clear that the creation, spread and maintenance of

²⁰ F J C Hearnshaw, *Outlines of the History of the British Isles* (Harrap 1938) 6

²¹ Hearnshaw, 7

²² Hearnshaw, 8

²³ N D Emerson, Irish Protestant ecclesiastical historian; Dean of Christ Church Cathedral Dublin

²⁴ N D Emerson, review of Hearnshaw, *Irish Historical Studies* vol 1 no 2 (September 1938) 207

²⁵ Benedikt Stuchtey, 'Literature, liberty and the life of the nation', 33, in Stefan Berger, with Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800* (Routledge 1999)

the empire was an aspect of England's manifest destiny. All described the expansion of England through colonisation in their accounts, broadening their identification of the nation to include the empire.²⁶ These authors believed that because of the progress towards ordered liberty the expansion of England was advantageous for colonies and mother country alike. Carrington noted that 'the story of the English nation can be considered ... extensively, that is, the carrying of [national] habits and institutions to other parts of the world'.²⁷ Lettice Fisher saw serendipity in the timing of initial colonisation, '...at the time of the constitutional struggle here, when men's minds were full of the idea of representative government', the American colonies and 'other dominions overseas, have all adopted for themselves the British plan of representative government.'²⁸ Trevelyan, too, looked to America for a pattern for overseas possessions to follow: in the American colonies 'already we see the germ of a free Empire, of a widespread Commonwealth of many races and religions, the ideal which both the United States and the British Empire of today realise in two different ways but in a kindred spirit'.²⁹

The popular histories of the inter-war years conveyed the imperial version of national development. Their readers would have inferred the message of expansion for mutual benefit as England's destiny and considered this the proper way to view English overseas possessions and the relationship with them. This empire was that on which the sun never set, rather than that where the blood never dried. In general the national narrative was still that of the development of liberty, rather than the development of a wider world role. The histories related imperial events, but these were secondary to the main themes.³⁰

However, Wingfield-Stratford changed his mind about the nature of Empire. He was not alone in this. Between the wars there was considerable debate about, and changes, to imperial government. In his 1913 work, *The History of English Patriotism*, his theme was the ability of the English to have 'contrived to combine liberty and order in a way that might be the envy of other nations...she and she alone has solved the problem of empire by the application of "Imperium et libertas"'.³¹ Here the English both govern subject peoples and promote the

²⁶ G R Searle, 25-26

²⁷ C E Carrington and J Hampden Jackson, *History of England* (Cambridge: CUP 1932), 646
Charles Carrington (1897-1990) Educational Secretary to Cambridge University Press; official biographer of Rudyard Kipling; J Hampden Jackson (1907-1966) schoolteacher and lecturer in university Extra-Mural Departments

²⁸ Lettice Fisher, 357

²⁹ Trevelyan *History of England*, 378

³⁰ Bernard Porter, 'Empire and British National Identity', in *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain* ed Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips, (Palgrave Macmillan 2004) 270

³¹ E Wingfield-Stratford, *The History of English Patriotism* (John Lane The Bodley Head 1913), 105-6

settlement of free, self-governing colonies by the English themselves.³² He believed that the English had in this way solved the problem of the tension between liberty and order. By 1939, Wingfield-Stratford was much less sure that the British had dealt with their Empire appropriately.³³ He thought that the Empire that rested on compulsion was contrary to the spirit of free England and advocated the Commonwealth ideal lauded by Baldwin. Lettice Fisher agreed with his perception of the new structure as a model to be emulated: “Commonwealth of Nations” was more than a happy phrase. It made us realise something of what a free union of free self-governing peoples, bound not by formal ties, but by common beliefs and traditions, might mean to the world.³⁴ Part of this meaning was ‘the British Empire as an institution for the promotion of peace, liberty, and well-being in the world’.³⁵

By 1939 some historians were revising their view of the empire. It was still regarded as a British achievement and destiny, but how it should develop was being modified in the light of new ideas about rule in other lands and resistance in some of the colonies especially India. Imperial rulers had begun the transformation from rule by enlightened civil servants bringing civilisation and order to self-governing democratic political structures. Williamson for example is clear that dominion status is the modern way to combine nationhood with empire.³⁶ Empire was being thought about very differently from the way it was regarded at the beginning of the century, and it featured less in the later histories.

Themes

Freedom

The most usual way to write the history of England was as a story of ever-increasing liberty. It was probably the most typical strand of the national story as told in these works. The Anglo-Saxons were generally seen as the originators of English freedom, as they were of the English people. English freedom consisted of several strands: the establishment of parliament and the common law; defeat of absolutism; the extension of the franchise. The inter-war historians who wrote the history of England continued to see it mainly as the history of freedom. The

³² J H Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain 1900-1939* (Routledge 1986) 127

³³ Wingfield-Stratford, *The History of English Patriotism*, 105-6

³⁴ Lettice Fisher, 723

³⁵ Lettice Fisher, 688

³⁶ J A Williamson, History teacher, Westminster City School, Ford's lecturer Oxford University 1937; J A Williamson, *The Evolution of England: a Commentary on the Facts* (Oxford Clarendon Press 1931) 319

liberal national narrative consensus of Trevelyan was not much influenced by the very different approach of Namier and his detailed analysis of members of parliament. Trevelyan in particular, a 'popularising academic', continued to try to bridge the science/literature divide in history.³⁷ This period saw the establishment of virtually universal suffrage and the establishment of parliament remained important in the narrative. 'The greatest of all achievements of state institutions was Parliament' noted Williamson.³⁸ Magna Carta was thought of as the first embodiment of English freedom, it being seen as providing a foundation on which later generations could and did build as the category of the 'free' widened. Most appreciated that Magna Carta was limited in scope; however, Lettice Fisher, for instance, claimed that Magna Carta applied to all classes of people.³⁹ The idea of some original Anglo-Saxon liberty which later peoples tried to preserve or defend had largely gone by the beginning of the twentieth century, at least in these histories: Pollard had rejected the 'myth' of Anglo-Saxon liberty and Williamson concluded that the Witan is no longer thought to have been a democratically elected body.⁴⁰

While historians no longer promoted the Teutonic bases of English freedom, the significance of the events of the mid-seventeenth century remained. Although the historians being considered have different opinions of the legality of the trial and execution of Charles I, they all agreed that the outcome, together with the events of 1688-9, constituted a definitive victory for control of the monarchy by parliament. Williamson, for example, defended the execution of Charles I in order to prevent worse abuses.⁴¹ This they saw as an essential part of English greatness and one of the defining elements in English exceptionalism. The events of 1688-9 continued to be regarded as key to English greatness in its later history. Trevelyan considered that, by ending the conflict of Crown and Parliament, the Revolution of 1688-9 created the conditions that 'led... to a new and wider liberty than had ever before been known in Britain'.⁴²

Historians were not all happy with the extensions to the franchise in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. One approach was to regard this widening as the culmination of the process of achieving liberty begun in 1688, with the Reform Bill of 1832 seen as the crucial measure. Lettice Fisher commented that 'the reformers asked...for the broadening of the basis on which the constitution rested in order to increase and maintain its stability.'⁴³ They

³⁷ Mandler, 70, 71

³⁸ J A Williamson, *The Evolution of England*, 118

³⁹ Fisher, 169-70

⁴⁰ Pollard, 20; Williamson, 38

⁴¹ Williamson, 243

⁴² G M Trevelyan, *History of England* (Longmans 1926 rev ed 1945) 472

⁴³ Lettice Fisher, 633-34

regarded the reform and extension of the franchise as the final achievement of progress towards liberty – political liberty – for all. Others were concerned about the extension of the franchise to those who might not have the education, the wisdom or the ability to use the vote responsibly. Wingfield-Stratford referred to ‘the ominous murmur that heralded the coming of democracy’.⁴⁴ Pollard thought that the industrial stage of development only ‘tends’ towards democracy. Trevelyan was also concerned about power in the hands of the masses, thinking that it was wise to retain a connection with the aristocracy. By 1947 he felt that ‘the advent of real democracy coinciding with 2 world wars has done the business – cooked the goose of civilisation.’⁴⁵ However, as the century went on, democracy, in Britain and France at any rate, was increasingly seen as the way to defend liberty against communism and fascism/Nazism. The development of English freedom in the past was thus celebrated and used in the present to position England as the continuing home of liberty and champion of those who might again be threatened by despotism.

Protestantism and the identity of the nation with the church

All these historians saw England as an essentially Protestant country. They regarded the nation’s religious character as an important, but not completely determining, factor in the emergence of national identity or state building. Those historians who mentioned Christianity in Roman Britain referred to it as one of the aspects of Romanisation that left surprisingly little legacy. The sixth century conversion was seen as more significant in developing national unity. Murphy remarked that ‘As the Church tightened its grip on the island, the English began to recognise themselves as one people’.⁴⁶ Other historians too, Trevelyan and Fisher, regard the existence of the English church as instrumental in creating national unity.⁴⁷ The Reformation is generally portrayed as the assertion of England’s independence from Rome in the religious sphere with the concomitant identification of church and state. From then on, Roman Catholics are portrayed as the ‘other’, as not part of the English nation.

Historians generally saw the second half of the sixteenth century as the point at which the English nation emerged, partly because of the formation at that time of the national church that continued into the twentieth century in the same form. The construction of a unique

⁴⁴ Wingfield-Stratford, *The History of English Patriotism*, 324

⁴⁵ G M Trevelyan to the Hammonds 5 November 1947, quoted in Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats*, (Cambridge, CUP 1978) 284

⁴⁶ Eileen Murphy, *Our last two thousand years. An Irishwoman’s history of England*, (Lovat, Dickson and Thompson 1935) 40

⁴⁷ Trevelyan, 62 ; Fisher, 69

church was part of the development of English national identity; referring to the Elizabethan religious settlement, Carrington noted that 'Above all, it was a National Church [which] has lasted, almost unaltered, until today.'⁴⁸ The struggles of the Civil War were generally located more in the conflict of king and parliament, with religion playing only a supporting role. When they discussed Catholic emancipation, the praise most historians afforded to increasing toleration of dissent is extended to Catholic emancipation. But it was as a connection with, and a part of, liberty that Protestantism was most significant to national historians. The link between Protestantism and liberty is explicitly made by Williamson. Quoting Latimer's comment to Ridley at their execution about lighting a candle that would never be put out, he continued: 'The words have often been quoted and are worth quoting, not for the glory of a creed but for liberty...every Englishman has something in his bones and blood that the Reformation martyrs have bequeathed him. His judgement is his own; he cannot yield it to the keeping of the state.'⁴⁹

Military prowess and defence of England

The earlier works focused considerable on wars and battles. England's victories, usually over the French, demonstrated the nation's superiority and leading place in the world. The eighteenth and nineteenth century wars were relatively recent, and their consequences more obvious to the contemporary nation. It was by defeating Louis XIV and Napoleon that England had fulfilled her historic destiny of making the continent of Europe safe for freedom and democracy. England's role was to be always on the side of Protestantism, always on the side of the countervailing power on the continent of Europe. This was what led England to fight the French so often. Most authors however regarded the loss of England's territories in Europe as a blessing, sometimes, as Trevelyan notes about the loss of Calais, 'a blessing in disguise to an island whose future did not lie on the continent of Europe'.⁵⁰ Innes described the First World War as 'the most tremendous, the most critical and the most righteous in the annals of mankind'. Lettice Fisher looked forward apprehensively to a likely future conflict with the same enemy. Trevelyan considered England's naval power the key to its greatness. England's identity was always bound up with its military and naval might.

Exceptionalism

Gradual, rather than sudden, violent change was presented as characteristic of English exceptionalism, an important but nebulous motif in much national history at this time. The form this took was well known – England's unique achievements of liberty, Protestantism and

⁴⁸ Carrington, 291

⁴⁹ Williamson, 178

⁵⁰ Trevelyan, 323

prosperity – and was a prevailing theme throughout this period. Baldwin referred to this idea in his many speeches; for example: ‘no nation in history has combined in the same degree political liberty, economic enterprise, and Imperial responsibility’.⁵¹ A more flamboyant version is described by the German Wilhelm Dibelius⁵², who saw England as having something unique to give to the world:

England is the single country in the world that, in looking after its own interest with meticulous care, has at the same time something to give to others; the single country where patriotism does not represent a threat or challenge to the rest of the world; the single country that invariably summons the most progressive, idealistic and efficient forces in other nations to co-operate with it.⁵³

However, the idea that the nation whose history is being written is special in some way was not held only by the English and their historians, but by other countries such as Germany and the US, as Stefan Berger notes.⁵⁴

Although the professionalisation of history in this period helped weaken the dominance of English exceptionalism in academic history, histories of the nation for the general reader continued to promote it. Most histories dated the beginnings, as they saw it, of parliamentary government to the thirteenth century and the beginnings of England’s status as a world power to the sixteenth. Lettice Fisher’s version is typical:

The real meaning of the Elizabethan period seems to be that while other nations were rent by wars of religion, England had achieved religious peace, some measure of social stability, was mainly governed by a shrewd, sensible middle class, free from the arrogance and pride of the old nobility and was thus free to use her abounding energies in every direction...The Elizabethan traders, explorers, and seamen not only added to the known world, and to their country’s wealth, not only gave to English ships and seamen an assurance of power and of the ability to go anywhere, face anyone, and do exactly what they wished in any circumstances, but also, and almost by accident, laid the foundations of what was to be the British Empire.⁵⁵

Most continued to assert, with Trevelyan, that England ‘...evolved in the course of centuries a system which reconciled three things that other nations have often found incompatible – executive efficiency, popular control, and personal freedom.’⁵⁶ The theme of the growth of

⁵¹ Quoted in Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin* (Cambridge, CUP 1999) 255, 256

⁵² Wilhelm Dibelius (1876-1931) Professor of English in the University of Berlin; wrote a biography of Dickens and a 2 volume work *England* published in English translation 1930, an analysis of English character

⁵³ Wilhelm Dibelius, *England* (Cape, London 1930) 108, quoted in Grainger, 273

⁵⁴ Stefan Berger, with Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore, ‘Apologias for the nation-state in Western Europe since 1880’, 10, in eds idem *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800* (Routledge 1999)

⁵⁵ Lettice Fisher, 326-27

⁵⁶ Trevelyan, *History of England*, xix

liberty was echoed by Wingfield-Stratford who wrote of '[t]he old, generous sympathy with freedom, which had come to be the special property of the English spirit'.⁵⁷

By the mid 1930s, however, historians had become noticeably less certain that English / British values and institutions would survive unscathed and certain that they would not continue unchallenged. Trevelyan to some extent, Fisher and Wingfield-Stratford all expressed concern that English civilisation was threatened. Just as Wingfield-Stratford's 1913 work ended with a plea to God and the people to prove themselves in the testing time that he could foresee on the eve of the First World War, so his third book (1939) concluded that '[m]ankind has to choose between two ways, one of empire, which is now that of the Totalitarian Powers, the other of freedom, which is our British way, so long as Britain preserves that truth to herself which is the soul of her civilisation'.⁵⁸ Likewise, Lettice Fisher declared at the end of her book that man may be able by his efforts and goodwill to overcome 'the dark forces of human fear, ignorance and hatred'. But, she continued in a passage reminiscent of Churchill, 'If he fails, the civilisation he has been building for many centuries may fall in ruins. If he succeeds, there seems little doubt that he may enjoy a fuller, freer, richer and better life than that man has yet known'.⁵⁹

Rural England

One of the reactions to the First World War by many gentry and intellectuals was to become (even more) hostile to mechanisation, industrialisation and mass culture. Trevelyan epitomised this stance most clearly. His history celebrated the rural and pastoral aspects of England and was noticeably less enthusiastic about the post-First World War period of the twentieth century. He shared this attitude with Baldwin and others who also constructed England as domestic, quiet and based in the countryside. This model was taken up in the Second World War in propaganda posters depicting England as rural rather than as an urban or industrial environment, despite the fact that it was the most urban country in Europe. But identifying England with its countryside was a version deriving from its (mythical) history of farmers, villagers and yeomen. This was represented as the source of England's strength. As the century progressed there was an increasing desire to construct an England that contrasted with European tyrannies, an England of freedom, tolerance, gradualism and fairness, but which had

⁵⁷ Wingfield-Stratford, *The Foundations of British Patriotism* (Routledge 1939), 361

⁵⁸ *The Foundations of British Patriotism*, 419

⁵⁹ Lettice Fisher, 815. It is interesting to compare Churchill's 18 June 1940 speech: 'Hitler knows he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all of Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States including all that we have known and cared for will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.'

in the past – and by implication would again – intervene militarily to defeat a European tyrant and ensure freedom in the continent of Europe.⁶⁰

Alternative narratives

However, the widely accepted national narrative, had never been the only version on offer. It was challenged from two principal alternative standpoints. Histories written from explicitly Catholic or Marxist viewpoints displayed their credentials openly. The works considered in the previous section were also written from an ideological point of view, but because that standpoint was so widely accepted, becoming indeed 'national history', it appeared to be neutral. As Butterfield observed, 'We may imagine that here in England we are free from the prejudices and enthusiasms of other nations. Sometimes we think that our history is the impartial narrative, and we hardly believe that we are performing an act of interpretation at all.'⁶¹ It is only when works based on a different philosophy are considered that this standpoint becomes clear. In this period, a Catholic work by Chesterton and a Marxist one by A L Morton were produced. Lingard's Catholic *History of England*, originally published in eight volumes between 1819 and 1830, continued in use, having several updates, and an Irish Catholic writer, Eileen Murphy, produced a minor work.

Catholic histories

Catholic histories construct one of the alternative stories of the history of England. Both Chesterton (1917) and Belloc (1934) produced histories that were intended to set the record straight. Belloc's *Shorter History of England* was dedicated to his friend G K Chesterton. Cannadine noted that Belloc's earlier multi-volume *History of England* (1925-31) was likely to have been a response to Trevelyan's work, but it did not sell well.⁶² He may have hoped a short version might have more success. He considered that the Roman origins of British society and the Roman Catholic version of Christianity were the real bases of English national life. He valued the old, the inherited, the traditional, the Catholic, even if changes resulted in the elimination of abuses. William the Conqueror, Henry IV, William and Mary were all described

⁶⁰ Julia Stapleton, *Political Identities and Public Intellectuals in Britain since 1870* (Manchester University Press 2001) 114

⁶¹ Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History* (Cambridge, CUP 1944) 1

⁶² Cannadine, *G M Trevelyan*, 36

as 'usurpers'. The Reformation was not a triumph for the independence of the national church; the Civil War, or Great Rebellion as Belloc calls it, was in his view nothing other than an unlawful rebellion.

A common judgement on Belloc's historical work, for instance in the *Times* review, was that he had forced a revision in the way the history of the Reformation was written, so that the Reformation could no longer be seen as a popular movement. Although very much a minority view when Belloc was writing, this view has now been adopted by some Catholic historians such as Eamon Duffy in *The Stripping of the Altars*.⁶³ The *TLS* review stated that Belloc's work provokes 'surprise, disagreement, as well as admiration and enlightenment'.⁶⁴ Tout, when reviewing Belloc's earlier *History of England*, thought that Belloc's views could be dangerously persuasive to those who did not know differently; Feske regards Belloc's views as an aspect of '...the general interwar reaction against Liberalism sweeping Britain along with the rest of the Empire'.⁶⁵

Along with Eileen Murphy's short book, Chesterton and Belloc display what Hobsbawm characterised as 'an ideological nostalgia for an imagined Middle Ages or feudal society, in which the existence of classes or economic groups was recognised, but the awful prospect of class struggle was kept at bay by the willing acceptance of social hierarchy, by a recognition that each social group or "estate" had its part to play in an organic society composed of all'.⁶⁶ The whole tenor of English history had been to view Catholicism as a shackle that needed to be cast off. It was this attitude, as much as any factual error, that Catholic writers believed needed revision.

Marxist history

According to Harvey Kaye, Morton's book, *A People's History of England*, was written to provide a popular Marxist history of England.⁶⁷ Raphael Samuel believed that Morton's book 'not only took its title from J R Green's *Short History*, but also – on Morton's own testimony –

⁶³ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c 1400- c1580* (New Haven CT, London: Yale University Press 1992).

⁶⁴ *TLS* 11 October 1934, 689; The *TLS Contributors' Index* attributes the review to Denis Brogan (Glasgow and Balliol College, Oxford; Professor of Political Science, University of Cambridge)

⁶⁵ *TLS* 23 July 1925, 490, quoted in Victor Feske, 57, 58. The *TLS Contributors' Index* attributes the review to T F Tout

⁶⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (Abacus 1995), 114

⁶⁷ A L Morton (1903-1987) journalist and school teacher; Harvey J Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians*, 2nd ed, (Macmillan 1995), 106

was in some sort modelled on it.⁶⁸ It was published in a Left Book Club edition and 48,000 copies of this version were produced, with a further 3000 printed, presumably for public sale.⁶⁹ It is still in print, including in the United States, having sold an estimated 100,000 copies in the UK since publication.⁷⁰ Gollancz positioned this history as part of his political campaign for world peace and against fascism. It would of course have provided a narrative of a radical England in which democracy and liberty were characterised differently from the dominant one, a narrative to be drawn on as a resource by Left Book Club readers.

As would be expected from a life-long Communist author, the organising principle was the creation of class – particularly working class – consciousness. In this interpretation, the working class emerged through the rise of the bourgeoisie, out of the collapse of feudalism. Morton was interested in the way society had changed: he was writing an interpretative account rather than a political narrative. From the beginning he used his Marxist interpretative framework overtly: the large plough was ‘...the technical key not only to the agriculture of the Celts but throughout the whole of the feudal period’, and the fall of the Roman Empire was ascribed to ‘...the rapid development of merchant and usurer’s capital with no industrial basis’.⁷¹ The style was simple and direct, using striking images, and is a joy to read. Stuchtey noted that the Marxists share high quality writing with the conservatives.⁷² It was reminiscent of both J R Green and Trevelyan, both of whom Morton cited as sources.

A short notice in the *AHR* did not think much of the work, noting disparagingly that there were more references to Marx in the index than to anyone else!⁷³ The work attracted not only a review in the *TLS* but also an article headed ‘The Swing in History’.⁷⁴ The review praised Morton’s ‘excellent literary style’. Morton’s treatment of the Industrial Revolution was singled out for commendation, so too his account of the development from medieval to modern economies. However he was thought to be too close a prisoner of his Marxist theory. This led him to neglect religious beliefs and personal qualities as influential factors in the historical process, a neglect the reviewer implied was unfortunate, creating an interpretation that paid

⁶⁸ Raphael Samuel, ‘British Marxist Historians’, *New Left Review*, no 120, March-April 1980, 41

⁶⁹ Gollancz production book MSS.318/2/1/12. Information provided by email by the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick

⁷⁰ Harvey J Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (Routledge 1992), 118

⁷¹ A L Morton, *A People’s History of England* (Gollancz 1935), 18, 26.

⁷² Benedict Stuchtey, ‘Literature, liberty and the life of the nation: British historiography from Macaulay to Trevelyan’, 41

⁷³ *AHR* XLVI (July 1941) 961

⁷⁴ ‘Seen From the Left’; ‘The Swing in History’ *TLS*, 11 June 1938, 395; 401. The *TLS Contributors’ Index* attributes both to Harold Martin Stannard

too little attention to what contemporaries thought was important. But Morton's view of history was Marxist; his aim was not to understand events as most contemporaries would have understood them. In the inter-war years no other significant Marxist histories appeared.⁷⁵ It was not until the formation of the Communist Party Historians Group in 1946 that English Marxist intellectuals began to develop a more structured approach to writing national history from within their particular philosophy. In the inter-war period, left thinking historians such as the Hammonds moved into detailed labour history. As the international situation worsened, some began to write polemical work for the Left Book Club, or like G D H Cole, Eileen Power and R H Tawney, supported various peace organisations. Lettice Fisher, whose book was published by Gollancz, Morton's original publisher and creator of the Left Book Club, was clear, as we have seen, that fascism was a great threat to English civilisation.

The work that most effectively subverted the Whig Interpretation of History was *1066 And All That*. It poked delicious, wicked fun at the notion of inevitable progress towards the glorified present – England becoming 'top nation'. It also, as Raphael Samuel noted, satirised the Tory 'great man' theory of history, thus mounting a double attack on 'Our Island Story'.⁷⁶ As Jonathan Conlin pointed out, 'one cannot miss their [Sellar and Yeatman's] nostalgia for its confidence, its moral absolutes and its eccentric heroes'.⁷⁷ The dominance of this interpretation of national history, conveyed in universal education, and the national mood of irreverence, all meant that it could only have been written for this audience at this time. You have to know your Whig history to appreciate the jokes. Although the audience read it for laughs, it is possible to see something more subversive in it. In noting its ridiculousness, readers could also infer the falseness of this version of the story. And by noting in the last chapter that 'America was...clearly top nation, and History came to a.' [sic], the authors signal the end of this version of history.

⁷⁵ Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870-1970*, (Cambridge CUP), 181

⁷⁶ Raphael Samuel, 'One in the Eye: 1066 And All That', in Raphael Samuel, *Island Story*, vol II *Theatres of Memory*, (Verso 1998), 209.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Conlin, 'Not All That Again' *History Today* January 2005 p 62-3

Narrators

The historians who produced these works came from a narrow social base and a generally conservative outlook. Born between 1869 (Hearnshaw) and 1907 (Jackson), they grew up during the Victorian or Edwardian period. All (bar Williamson, who was at London) were educated at Oxford or Cambridge, including Lettice Fisher (Somerville College, Oxford). Many became either schoolmasters (Williamson, Morton, and Sellar) or university teachers; Jackson was in the Cambridge Extra Mural department. Two were in educational publishing (Carrington and Innes). Wingfield-Stratford was a private scholar, as for a period was Trevelyan. There are no aristocrats like Macaulay and Acton. They thus largely share a common background in education and social class; and therefore perhaps held a common view of the role of the historian in society. An exception is A L Morton, although he was educated at Cambridge. He joined the Communist Party in 1928, did some school teaching and then joined the *Daily Worker* for three years; after the war he taught at Summerhill for five years.⁷⁸ Raphael Samuel called him 'a Communist of the old school, one of a small but remarkable band of middle- and upper-middle-class Bohemians who joined the party in the 1920s and became Communists for life'.⁷⁹ They felt themselves to be public servants, using what Stefan Berger called their cultural capital as scholars, seeking to influence public opinion in the widest sense.⁸⁰ As history became more professionalized, historians felt less well placed to adopt the role of public intellectual. Those who continued to want to address the public were often those only loosely or not at all connected to the universities – Trevelyan, Wingfield-Stratford, Lettice Fisher – although Trevelyan was also a professional historian, as was Williamson. Thus the very English tradition of amateur historian from Macaulay onwards was maintained during the first half of the twentieth century.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Harvey J Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (Routledge 1992), 119

⁷⁹ Raphael Samuel, 'A Rebel and His Lineage', in *History and the Imagination: Selected Writings of A L Morton* eds Margot Heinemann and Willie Thompson, (Lawrence and Wishart 1990), 7

⁸⁰ Stefan Berger, 'History and National Identity: why they should remain divorced' November 2007 <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-66.html> ; Julia Stapleton, *Political Identities and Public Intellectuals in Britain since 1870* (Manchester University Press 2001) p 20

⁸¹ Stuart Woolf, review of ed Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore, *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800*. <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/berger.html>

Conclusion

Most of these narratives presented history as national identity, providing a story of the national past to engender pride in being British. These histories enabled people to find in the past a confirmation of their present identities. Most of the narratives were straightforward and linear. They are histories of events, institutions and individuals, in which national characters and events, such as Elizabeth I, Magna Carta or the battle of Trafalgar are often idealised and mythologised. There is no discussion within the works of alternative or conflicting interpretations, although the authors do on occasion refer to the problems of interpreting evidence to reach historical understanding. Only the works by Wingfield-Stratford are described as the history of the nation; others present a history, perhaps indicating a greater awareness of alternative versions of the national story. The nation about which historians are writing is generally England: seven contain 'England' in their titles. Only three have a specifically British emphasis. As David Cannadine notes, this English emphasis comes at a time when the British Empire was at its widest, and when Britain was, if not quite at the peak of its political and economic power, still extremely influential.⁸²

But the generally accepted outline of the national story was not unchallenged. Within traditional accounts the empire featured less. Alternative narratives, focusing on religion and class, were written to dispute the standard interpretation. Religion as a theme is present through most of these histories, religion as Protestantism and presented as a defining characteristic of the English nation. The books that use Roman Catholicism as the defining idea of English history aim specifically at overturning the dominant narrative of English history in which progress is identified with both parliament and Protestantism. Leslie Morton's Marxist *A People's History of England* was a conscious effort by the Communist Party of Great Britain to utilise history as an instrument to try to alter the politics of the 1930s.⁸³ It was also written to foreground the common people and their attempts to achieve liberty and status within the nation.

During the first part of the twentieth century, popular histories of the nation had become less concerned with reciting the events constituting English greatness and more interested in the

⁸² David Cannadine, 'Nation' in *Making History Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies and Explanations* (Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 175-6

⁸³ Spalding, review of Peter Mandler, *History and National Life*
<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/spaldingR.html>

economic and social, less convinced of the satisfactory present to which history had been leading and more aware of the probable dangers to come. Julia Stapleton notes that widening the franchise extended the political nation and rendered elite history increasingly irrelevant. It now had to be about the people, not just rulers or institutions.⁸⁴ Assumptions of English superiority give way, at least partially, to awareness of possible problems, for example with the empire, and the need to reframe it. Collini refers to an increasing sense at this time of inheriting a divided and contentious history.⁸⁵ A number of popular histories were not written by professional historians. The professionalisation of the discipline led some to regard writing for ordinary people as not the sort of thing academics should be doing; rather they should be squirreling away in the archives and producing history appealing mostly to other historians. Telling the national story to the nation was increasingly the task of private researchers (Wingfield-Stratford for instance) and of those with other jobs; only Innes, Pollard, Trevelyan and Williamson were academic historians, and Trevelyan spent a considerable time outside the academy.

The impact of the Boer War, the First World War, the Russian Revolution, periods of continuing industrial conflict, the economic difficulties at the beginning of the 1930s and the looming international crisis of the later 1930s all made people eager to consider what sort of nation they lived in, how it had come into existence and where it should be going. The pre-First World War works responded to the concerns about British military superiority and social provision by continuing to write an imperialist and triumphalist version of national history. The First World War made historians more thoughtful about the nature of English civilisation, and the growing international threat pushed at least some writers into a prophetic mode. A discourse of English exceptionalism was recruited to promote national identity and to comment on issues of the day. Adult suffrage was conflated with liberty for all, imperialism was re-structured as free association, and the whole of the United Kingdom was recruited to provide a challenge to European dictators. The apparent settlement of the constitutional issues concerning the borders of the United Kingdom and the powers of parliament contributed also to a shift of emphasis in the main themes treated by historians. Following the First World War, a preoccupation with the rural and pastoral was a characteristic of intellectual life; Trevelyan in particular portrayed English identity in these terms. The events of the next twenty years provided the stimulus for yet further shifts in the national story.

⁸⁴ Stapleton, *Public Intellectuals*, 39-40

⁸⁵ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford Clarendon Press 1991), 372

CHAPTER 4 HISTORY IN WARTIME 1939-1945

Works studied

- 1943 Rowse, A L, *The spirit of English history*, Cape
1944 Trevelyan, G M, *English Social History*, Longman
1944 Butterfield, Herbert, *The Englishman and His History*

Little popular history for general readers was produced during the war. Nevertheless, the national narrative was important in wartime, serving two purposes: to comfort civilians and to inspire the military through constructing an image of the nation that had special resonance in time of threat.

History in World War 2 Britain conformed to this pattern. The government undertook a programme of army education for both the military abroad and troops stationed in Britain. History relevant to a wider audience was produced by Penguin Books, by historians at Oxford who wrote a series of Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs and by a few historians writing works with particular relevance to the nation at war. It also continued to be disseminated through the presence of older books that still served as the medium for informing the public of their national history.

Disruption to universities during the war was considerable. Some premises suffered bomb damage; some were requisitioned by the military, institutions were diverted to alternative uses and for others evacuation interrupted their work. By 1944 only 68% of full time university teachers were in post.¹ Some historians, such as A J P Taylor and Keith Feiling, continued in or returned to academic teaching. Others were in the armed forces (C E Carrington, E P Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm), or like Joel Hurstfield were in the civil service, while yet others, like J H Plumb and Asa Briggs who were at Bletchley Park, did war service in intelligence. Such activities meant much less new history was being written – E L Woodward described the output of historians in the Second World War as ‘a mere trickle’ – and what was produced was not popular histories of the nation.² However, J A Williamson’s *The Evolution of England: a Commentary on the Facts* was published in a second edition in 1944. Paper shortage, the involvement of some contributors in war work, and the inevitable delays in any large project meant that the OUP did not issue the volumes of the Oxford History of England (known at the Press as OHEL) as quickly as they hoped or had at first anticipated. Williamson’s book did something to plug this gap. In 1944 the OUP wrote to one of the many enquirers about the

¹ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: 1918-1951* (Oxford, OUP 2000) 257; EL Woodward, ‘Modern Historical Studies in England since 1939’, paper read at the Anglo-American Historical Conference at the IHR, 5 July 1947, published in *Bulletin of the IHR* Vol XXI

² E L Woodward, ‘Modern Historical Studies’

progress of the OHEL apologising for the delay but suggesting Williamson's book if the correspondent had not already read it.³

National history produced for army education

Army education was carried out through the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA) from September 1941, and the Army Council's 'British Way and Purpose' from 1942.⁴ ABCA was intended to raise the morale of troops still stationed in Britain and to make them 'match up to Cromwell's famous definition of the citizen-soldier as one who "must know what he fights for and love what he knows."' ⁵ Its format was a series of booklets: 'Current Affairs', produced fortnightly (alternating with 'War') was intended to form the basis for junior officers to conduct discussion sessions with their men. The British Way and Purpose (BWP) material was designed to complement ABCA's and was also intended to educate the troops.

Neither of these schemes produced much historical material. The Secretary of State for War, P J Grigg, proposed that BWP material to be provided for the winter of 1943-4 should include

some semi-historical books about different parts of the Empire, showing not too ostentatiously what in fact the British have done. India would make a fascinating series of numbers of this character. A purely historical series on the Napoleonic wars could be made also to promote a higher degree of Empire consciousness.⁶

In the event, The British Way and Purpose contained little explicit history: there was some on the origins of empire and some on British ethnic origins. The chapter on the empire asked 'how has it happened that a small island, in early times quite insignificant...has become the centre of an Empire spread over five continents and seven seas?'⁷ It went on to consider how the empire was now controlled, with the focus on the empire's present condition.

Unlike the BWP, the Army Bureau of Current Affairs material was not arranged in thematic sections. Over a hundred booklets were produced between 1941 and 1945. Although bits of our history were mentioned, it was not until no. 100, produced in July 1945, that an issue

³ Oxford University Press archives, Box OP 2083 PB/ED 015660

⁴ The Army Bureau of Current Affairs was set up in August 1941 to educate and raise morale among British servicemen through weekly discussion sessions

⁵ SP Mackenzie, *Politics and Military Morale: Current-Affairs and Citizenship Education in the British Army 1914-1950* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1992) 85-88; Army Council, *Outline of a New Plan* August 1941 (National Archives PREM 4/6/2)

⁶ Quoted in Mackenzie, 154

⁷ *The British Way and Purpose*. BWP 5 'Commonwealth and Empire', 180, issued March 1943. Consolidated edition of booklets 1-18 prepared by the Directorate of Army Education, 1944

wholly devoted to national history called 'The Island: Our British Heritage', by Denis Brogan, was produced. The questions he wished his readers to be able to answer were: 'Why are we not as other men are? What have we got that the others haven't got?'⁸ His answer was not very different from that given by earlier historians. He thought that our exceptionalism was rooted in England's long-standing unity. After the Norman Conquest, 'the English people, Norman nobles and English peasants, got used to the idea of unity, got used to thinking it quite impossible to think of a really divided England.'⁹ England was a place where change was gradual and well managed. 'England' could be used to stand for 'Britain'; the country was also part of Europe but also had its own life. England had been lucky compared to Scotland and Wales, which were both smaller and poorer. That Britain was an island was also fortunate: there were more opportunities for development, no destructive invasions nor outside threats, and this situation had allowed liberty and tolerance to develop. Early political unity created circumstances for the development of a legal system and parliamentary democracy, allowing both freedom and authority to emerge.¹⁰ In general we liked to leave people and organisations alone. Our revolution had been 'mild' but it ensured that we never had a despotic government, even if subsequent developments had been quite stormy. Fear of violence and extremism had kept domestic political conflict manageable. Brogan concludes with the summary:

the special character of English life ... [came] from a long, unbroken and generally fortunate history, which allowed the character of the people to form, its institutions to grow, the adjustments insisted on by time and change to be made with little bloodshed, little acrimony, hardly ever to be unmade and usually to be made in time, if just in time.¹¹

Oxford pamphlets

In the First World War historians at Oxford issued a series of pamphlets about Britain's reasons for engagement in the war and about Britain's role in the world more generally. In the Second World War Oxford historians again engaged in a pamphlet campaign. Explanations of why Britain was at war, and how this had come about, started even before the war. The Second World War series of Oxford pamphlets was the brainchild of G N Clark who proposed the idea, and Arthur Norrington, who was working for the Oxford University Press. Just after Munich, Clark suggested a series of brief essays on 'why we are about to be at war again'.¹² Norrington's idea was for 'something between a Penguin (too long) and a Spectator article (too

⁸ Denis Brogan, *The Island: Our English Heritage*, ABCA Current Affairs No. A100 July 28, 1945, 2

⁹ Brogan, 7

¹⁰ Brogan, 14

¹¹ Brogan, 16

¹² Peter Sutcliffe, *The Oxford University Press: an informal history* (Oxford, OUP 1978) 249

short),’ settling for essays of 7,500 words, or thirty-two pages. Launched before the outbreak of war, the first four Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs appeared in July 1939, priced at 3d.

The Second World War series of Oxford pamphlets differed from those produced in the First World War. They were much more focused on foreign affairs, although some reflected more generally on the conflict. Typical of this reflection was E L Woodward’s pamphlet on *The Origins of the War* produced in 1941. He writes:

We are not fighting for the shifting of the boundary posts a few score miles to the north or south or east or west. We are not fighting to maintain a rule of privilege or monopoly in our own country. We are fighting for a particular way of life. This way of life allows for change, and looks for betterment; already through the sacrifice and energy of past generations it has brought us out from barbarism and set us towards a reasonable and humane existence.¹³

A free and tolerant England was being created in implicit contrast to Nazi Germany, just as the First World War authors had pointed up the contrast with the Kaiser’s Germany. The pamphlets appeared throughout the war, and some 70 had been produced by 1945.¹⁴ The government was concerned to enlist support for the war, and found these apparently factual, informative, well-written, but short, cheap, and visually attractive pamphlets an ideal vehicle.¹⁵ The Ministry of Information became interested in promoting the pamphlets, thus helping the OUP with selling them. Although at first booksellers were reluctant to stock them because the return on a 3d work was so slight, the readiness of the public to buy them soon changed the situation. These pamphlets, like those of the First World War, were also translated into several languages. Norrington thought that about 6 million were sold altogether.¹⁶

Penguin books

Also important in disseminating history to the public, and later in the war to the forces, was the Penguin imprint. Allen Lane, the founder of Penguin, decided to produce specially commissioned books to deal with immediate issues of concern: Penguin Specials. These were brief books dealing with particular topics, usually foreign affairs, intended to illuminate an issue for general readers. Shorter and more accessible than Left Book Club choices, they

¹³ E L Woodward, *The Origins of the War* (Oxford, OUP pamphlet 41 1941) 32

¹⁴ Sutcliffe, 249

¹⁵ Valerie Holman, ‘Carefully Concealed Connections: the Ministry of Information and British Publishing’ *Book History* vol 8 2005 197-226

¹⁶ Sutcliffe, 249

reached a wider and less committed market.¹⁷ Between November 1937 and the outbreak of war, 35 Specials had been produced.¹⁸ One of the best known was Harold Nicolson's *Why Britain is at War*. Lane visited Nicolson on 25 September 1939 and commissioned him to write a Special on why Britain was at war.¹⁹ It was finished in a fortnight and published on 5 November. Sales were 100,000, including a good number in the United States.²⁰

The war was a highly profitable time for Penguin Books. Because of its high volume printing in the year before the outbreak of war, boosted by the Specials, it was allocated more paper than many of its rivals. The war increased the appetite for reading among bored soldiers and civilians waiting out air raids, but it also decreased the supply of books due to bomb damage as well as paper limitations. Penguins were cheap and small, easy to carry around; troops were observed with them in their pockets.²¹ The Ministry of Information intervened informally in what was produced and usually worked through its preferred mainstream publishers, among which were OUP and Penguin. Lane's friendship with Kenneth Clark at the Ministry of Information gave him advantage in getting material published.²² W E Williams notes that early Pelicans (which began to appear from May 1937) were reprints of authoritative works including history, but were followed by works produced specially for Penguin.²³ Of 90 Penguins in total published during the war, about 20 were history titles. By publishing these works, Penguin helped to keep awareness of new historical thought and writing alive, although they did not publish much on English history per se. The last parts of Halévy's *History of the English People* appeared in November 1939 and March 1940; works on prehistoric Britain, the history of science, architecture and literature were also produced.

National history produced in response to the war

In wartime an increased sense of national identity and unity encouraged greater awareness of the nation's history and its role in forming that identity. On 11th September 1940, broadcasting to the nation at the height of the Battle of Britain, Churchill declared:

¹⁷ Jeremy Lewis, *Penguin Special: the Life and Times of Allen Lane*, (Viking 2005) 134

¹⁸ Lewis, 137

¹⁹ Ed Nigel Nicolson, *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1939-45* (Collins 1967) 37

²⁰ Lewis, 150

²¹ Lewis, 153-156

²² J E Morpurgo, *Allen Lane King Penguin* (Hutchinson 1979) 157-8

²³ W E Williams, *The Penguin Story MCMXXXV MCMLVI* (Penguin 1956) 14

Therefore we must regard the next week or so as a very important period in our history. It ranks with the days when the Spanish Armada was approaching the Channel and Drake was finishing his game of bowls, or when Nelson stood between us and Napoleon's Grand Army at Boulogne. We have read all about this in the history books; but what is happening now is on a far greater scale and of far more consequence to the life and future of the world and its civilisation than these brave old days of the past.²⁴

Churchill had almost finished his *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* when he laid it aside just after entering the government. The link between history and the nation was very much in his mind. When he became Prime Minister in May 1940 he felt himself rising to the challenge of leading the nation in its darkest hour, and he found it natural to turn to history for inspiration and rationale for conduct of the war. Both military history, as in Bryant's *Years of Endurance*, and social history, as in Trevelyan's *English Social History* were popular. Both were useful in wartime. While the older themes, freedom under the law and parliamentary democracy, remained, it was England as the countryside and England as victor against despots that histories published during the war itself principally reflected. One sort of history that seemed to combine the themes of freedom and England's great power role was the history of empire: England spreading its civilising mission throughout the world through its superior culture.

First to respond to Churchill was Arthur Bryant. During the war he published three works of history: *English Saga* (1940), *The Years of Endurance* (1942) and *Years of Victory* (1944). Although not a comprehensive history of the nation, *English Saga*, which covered the period 1840 to 1940, reflected on the social history/rural theme. Andrew Roberts noted that Bryant's works were the literary equivalent of Churchill's speeches urging the British people to emulate great heroes.²⁵ A L Rowse published his *Spirit of English History* in 1943, and G M Trevelyan and Herbert Butterfield both produced books in 1944. Rowse's and Butterfield's were small books each with a particular view of English history. Trevelyan's social history began with Chaucer but ended with Victoria. It was completed in 1941 but paper became available for publication in Britain only in 1944 (it had appeared in the US in 1942).²⁶ Butterfield's *The Englishman and His History* appeared the same year. Published as no. 19 in the CUP series 'Current Problems', begun in 1942 by Ernest Barker with the aim of showing what Britain stood for, it was a brief account of the way English history had traditionally been recounted.

²⁴ Winston Churchill, 'Every Man to his Post', broadcast speech, 11 September 1940. *Into Battle: speeches by the Right Hon Winston S Churchill PC MP* compiled by Randolph S Churchill MP, (Cassell 1941), 273

²⁵ Andrew Roberts, *Eminent Churchillians* (Phoenix paperback 1995) 287

²⁶ David Cannadine, *GM Trevelyan: a Life in History* (Fontana Press paperback 1993) 170

Wartime themes

England as countryside

One of the themes history developed at this time was that of country, as noted by both Rose and Melman.²⁷ History that emphasised England's rural past and celebrated the rural present also enabled writers and readers to see English history as the history of long continuities. Features that had endured for hundreds of years had been tested by time and found to be valuable. Hence they were worth fighting to preserve. Ministry of Information material often used images of fields or farms to stand for Britain, even though Britain was in fact one of the most urban countries in Europe. But, as Robert Colls points out, the rural is associated with the personal, small scale and gentle aspects of national identity; these were especially attractive in wartime.²⁸ Baldwin had frequently used the image of England as country in his speeches in the thirties. A well-known metaphor was being drawn on here. As the war went on, the experience of evacuation, revealing different ways of life to evacuated town dwellers and those who lived in the country reception areas, encouraged a perception of a clean, healthy, proper countryside compared with dirty immoral slums.²⁹

Trevelyan's was the work that most used the idea of England as country. As Mark Donnelly observed in *Britain in the Second World War*, J B Priestly's broadcast 'Postscripts', begun the Sunday after Dunkirk, 'offered reassurance to listeners, using rural images and references to popular history to persuade them that they could cope with the crisis to come.'³⁰ Although Trevelyan had written much of *English Social History* before the outbreak of war, it may have been the difficulties and dangers of that time, in which international affairs were of such importance, that made primarily social history seem particularly appealing.³¹ Time after time he asserted that only in its rural aspects was England truly herself. Examples could be multiplied: one that was less obvious but still striking was his use of the term 'divorce' to describe the evolution of the medieval peasant 'either into farmer or yeoman, or into the landless labourer..., or into the town workman divorced from the land'.³² Placing the urban worker last in the list was suggestive, but the term 'divorce' signalled the separation of two entities that properly belong with each other. This was great subtlety of writing. Further

²⁷ Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (OUP 2003); Billie Melman, *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past 1800-1953* (OUP, 2006), 6

²⁸ Robert Colls, *Identity of England*, chapter 12 (Oxford: OUP 2002)

²⁹ Sonya O Rose, 59

³⁰ Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War*, (Routledge 1999), 78

³¹ David Cannadine, *G M Trevelyan: A Life in History* (Fontana Press 1993) 170

³² *English Social History*, 118

evidence of such delicacy was seen in the following passage, where describing imitation as 'fatally' easy made the connection between urban dwelling and death:

When Waterloo was fought, rural England was still in its unspoilt beauty, and most English towns were either handsome or picturesque. The factory regions were a small part of the whole, but unluckily they were the model for the future. A new type of urban community was permitted to grow up which it was fatally easy to imitate on an ever increasing scale until in a hundred years the great majority of Englishmen were dwellers in mean streets.³³

Trevelyan presented a society whose essential condition was perceived to be rural. He felt that was particularly threatened by the German mechanised, industrial, fascist dictatorship but which also appealed to a rural-based 'volk' and praised outdoor life. He expressed strongly throughout this book his deep dislike – almost fear – of the modern, the industrial, the urban. No wonder the review in the *Spectator* was called 'The Field of Folk'.³⁴ *English Social History* proved to be immensely popular, 245,000 copies being sold between publication and May 1946, and 400,000 by 1949, leading Mandler to describe it as 'probably the best selling history book of the twentieth century'.³⁵ Plumb reported that that he had on his military service 'seen it being read by soldiers who had left school at fourteen and who had probably never held a hardback book in their hands since'. Its lasting popularity thought Briggs was due also to its not referring to the war, making it of more long-term appeal.³⁶ To help present Trevelyan's conception of the history of England more widely to the public, Longman issued in 1942 a 'Shortened' version of his *History of England*.

Bryant's *English Saga* was a lament for lost rural England and a condemnation of the Industrial Revolution.³⁷ As the agricultural depression reduced food production in England, 'henceforward the foreigner was to feed Britain.'³⁸ Consequently 'the home smoke rising from the valley...the field of rooks and elms, had given place to a tenement in the land of the coal truck and the slag heap.'³⁹ Such an approach was unsatisfactory in that the actual nature of British society in the mid twentieth century, the most industrialised and urbanised in Western Europe, was either ignored or deplored. The histories were thus histories of only a part of

³³ *English Social History*, 464

³⁴ E L Woodward, 'The Field of Folk', *Spectator*, 25 August 1944

³⁵ Asa Briggs, 'G M Trevelyan: the Uses of Social History' in *Collected Essays* vol 2 (Brighton Harvester Press 1985) 242; Mandler, 71

³⁶ Briggs, *Collected Essays* vol 2, 248

³⁷ Julia Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain* p 164 (Lexington Books, Lanham Maryland USA).

³⁸ Arthur Bryant, *English Saga* (Collins 1940) 233

³⁹ Bryant, *English Saga* 234

society and so marginalised significant aspects of the nation. By its very title 'Saga' Bryant was mythologizing rural England and idealising the nation. It too was a patriotic history.

England as a free democratic nation

Trevelyan's *English Social History* concentrated not only on England's rural heritage but also on its freedom. He observed, 'Personal freedom became universal at an early date in our country, and this probably is one reason for the ideological attachment of Englishmen to the very name of "freedom."' ⁴⁰ English liberty had sprung from 'the mediaeval balance and harmony of powers'. 'People and corporations have rights and liberties which the State ought in some degree to respect'. ⁴¹ An essential aspect of the English concept of freedom was the 'freedom [for individuals] to live their own lives undisturbed by oppression'. ⁴² The relevance of this interpretation of English history during war against fascism and Nazism was obvious. As Trevelyan noted in his *History of England*, England's control of the sea was crucial. In *English Social History*, England was characterised as 'an island with an ocean destiny' and for which naval war 'promoted a tendency towards freedom'. ⁴³

For A L Rowse, too, the island nature of England was important. The English had, in his view, long been 'different' partly because the island situation made the land easier to invade and so produced a greater variety of peoples to make up the inhabitants. ⁴⁴ It was very much a book of its time; it was dedicated somewhat effusively to Churchill, describing him as 'Historian, Statesman, Saviour of his Country'. Rowse's title, *The Spirit of English History*, showed him laying claim to be presenting something key to English national history, something of its essence. The notion of an English spirit, a common belief in the essential character of England, was prevalent at the time, as Ernest Barker noted. ⁴⁵ The *TLS* review commented that '...for Mr Rowse, as for nearly all the great historians, it is pre-eminently as the story of expanding freedom that English history has significance.' ⁴⁶ The judgements were of a familiar sort, tested by time; while recognising the influence of economic factors, the role of individuals in shaping events was seen as central. The Industrial Revolution created a society very different from that of the medieval and Tudor periods 'and yet with so much that is continuous and

⁴⁰ G M Trevelyan, *English Social History* (Longman 1944) 15

⁴¹ *English Social History*, 96

⁴² *English Social History*, 123

⁴³ *English Social History* 140, 194

⁴⁴ Rowse, 12

⁴⁵ Ernest Barker, *The Character of England*, (1957), 201

⁴⁶ *TLS* 'The English Attitude: Liberty through Co-operation', 12 April 1943 p 577. The *TLS Contributors' Index* reveals the author of this review as Dermot Morah

recognisably the same in the character of the people'.⁴⁷ For Rowse, even so major an economic and social upheaval could not disrupt the fundamental nature of the English people. In these ways Rowse's history was of the same kind as Trevelyan's.

It was his reflections on the differences between English and French or German history that led Butterfield to produce *The Englishman and His History*. Butterfield wrote *Napoleon*, published in autumn 1939, in which he made explicit his analogy between Napoleon and Hitler.⁴⁸ Despite this, he initially advocated negotiating with Hitler, but in 1944 Butterfield accepted that he had been influenced to change his views by Churchill's appeal to the English people to rely on their history in the dark times of 1940.⁴⁹ When Churchill died in 1965, Cambridge selected Butterfield as the most appropriate person to deliver the eulogy at the university's memorial service for Churchill, thus recognising his support for Churchill's views.⁵⁰ In a variety of historical work, Butterfield contributed to the war effort: his historical contribution to a study of France for the Navy; the conferences of refugee historians that he organised; his project on historical geography, and his teaching, in all of which he sought to understand and explain the origins of the contemporary situation in Europe.⁵¹

In *The Englishman and His History* Butterfield used his historical work for clearly political purposes, supporting the British position against the Nazis.⁵² Many, including such different historians as E H Carr, Geoffrey Elton and David Cannadine, thought at the time and subsequently that in this work Butterfield had changed his mind about the Whig Interpretation of History.⁵³ He was criticised for having previously excoriated practising history as an account of inevitable progress toward the good present but changing his mind now that 'we...rejoice in an interpretation of the past which has grown up with us'.⁵⁴ The book, in two parts, surveyed first English history and then Whig politics in action, thus making a distinction between Whig history, which he deplored, and whig politics, which he praised. Whig politics, allied with Providence, led in England to a favourable outcome.

McIntire however argues that Butterfield in fact achieved some continuity between his earlier and later comments on the nature of English history. Rather than a rupture, there was

⁴⁷ Rowse, 112

⁴⁸ C McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter* (Yale UP New Haven and London 2004) 109

⁴⁹ McIntire, 112

⁵⁰ McIntire, 117

⁵¹ McIntire, 112-15

⁵² McIntire, 109

⁵³ Keith Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke Hampshire 2005) 82-84

⁵⁴ Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History* (Cambridge: CUP 1944) 4

evolution as Butterfield's thinking developed under the pressure of world events, forcing a rethink of the nature of English freedom that found expression in *The Englishman and His History*. Although the nature of English development is fulsomely praised in the later book, Butterfield was not recommending writing history to demonstrate an inevitable outcome. That English history has brought us to such satisfactory circumstances was due more to the English cooperation with Providence than to any inevitable result. However, Bentley found it hard to understand why readers were confused: the distinctions Butterfield drew between Whig history and whig politics seemed clear to him.⁵⁵ *The Englishman and His History* was undoubtedly the sort of history Churchill wanted, but because it was not published until 1944 it was not as helpful to the war effort as it might have been had it appeared earlier.⁵⁶ However, as E L Woodward noted in his review in *The Spectator*, 'Mr Butterfield's conclusion is as wise and as charming as his argument. He sees that our past has been a present strength to us, but he knows that we cannot live by tradition alone...the English tradition...stands, and their grumbling and argumentative acceptance of methods of reconciliation rather than embitterment in politics, the English may still do more than save themselves: once again they may save Europe.'⁵⁷

England as victorious and imperial

Unsurprisingly, the Armada, the putative (Spanish) invasion which the British fought off successfully, was described as 'the crisis of English history'. Its resonances with the contemporary Nazi threat were obvious and drawing parallels between Napoleon and Hitler was common. Dealing with French aggressive power, whether in the person of Louis XIV or Napoleon, had been necessary for England to protect her position and interests, but it had been possible to do this effectively only when 'the magnates won their victory in 1688'.⁵⁸ The ability to defeat foreign tyranny rested on control of the monarch by parliamentary representatives. Only free and democratic nations had the moral qualities needed to defeat the contemporary threat, and this history was designed to show that England was this sort of nation.

Here was the connection between the free and democratic country and the country victorious in war. Bryant suggested that, just as England had been victorious against other significant

⁵⁵ Michael Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, Science and God* (CUP 2011) 168

⁵⁶ McIntire, 130

⁵⁷ E L Woodward, 'The English and their History', *Spectator* 14 July 1944; the reference is to Pitt's speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet to celebrate Trafalgar: 'England has saved herself by her exertions and will, I trust, save Europe by her example.' (noted in Bryant *The Search for Justice*, p 1)

⁵⁸ Rowse, 74

threats from Europe, particularly the Spanish Armada and Louis XIV, so England would be victorious against this latest threat. Bryant's volumes on the Napoleonic Wars were revealingly called *The Years of Endurance* and *Years of Victory*, a rallying call to his readers, as he sought to encourage their patriotism and so their efforts to repel an aggressor.⁵⁹ As Julia Stapleton noted, the dust-jacket of the first volume of Bryant's study of the Napoleonic wars concluded: 'to look into these pages is to see in a mirror the same task, the same obstacles, the same mistakes and disappointments, but the same resolve and enduring virtues. The historian by recalling them, reinforces our faith and assurance in ultimate victory.'⁶⁰ The books were well received. Desmond McCarthy described them as an inspiration to a nation at war in sustaining fortitude at home and heroism abroad. Dermot Morrah in the *TLS* found 'a narrative to stir the hearts of the English with the pride of ancestry'.⁶¹ The British were repeatedly told by the government, press, historians and other commentators what and who they were: brave, alone, a race apart, descendants of Drake, heirs to Nelson.

However, this free and victorious England created and ruled an empire – 'the natural expression of the vigorous energies of a ... successful nation'.⁶² Rowse likened the Dominions and their connection with Britain – the mother country – to the relationships within a family, contrasting these with Nazi or Italian aggressive moves to dominate and control other territories. The structure the British had developed by which to link the Dominions with Britain could be a pattern for other nations to follow in international attempts to create ways in which nation-states can work together. Like Churchill, Rowse would have liked America to remain linked to England; had we been more politically mature 'we might have hit on the right answer – self-government retaining the formal connection under the Crown' similar to the structure adopted for the present Dominions.⁶³ The development of self-government within the empire was its most significant feature. It was like a working example of a League of Nations, 'perhaps the chief contribution in the realm of political organisation which we have to make to this age'.⁶⁴

Bryant considered that it was in the acquisition and development of empire that the English were at their best – the best not only for their own people but also for the world. His *English Saga* drew on the theme of empire to give structure to Britain's sense of its own identity in

⁵⁹ Julia Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain*, (Lexington Books, Lanham Maryland USA) 173

⁶⁰ Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant*, 176 (Lexington Books, Lanham Maryland USA)

⁶¹ Stapleton, 184-85

⁶² Rowse, 63

⁶³ Rowse, 92

⁶⁴ Rowse, 126

wartime. He considered that Britain valued its empire for three reasons. First, it provided a place of emigration for some of the population of an overcrowded island. Ideas of invigorating young men becoming flabby at home were present also. Second, empire provided markets for exports and an assured supply of raw materials. Third, it allowed for the spread of English values and ways of life.⁶⁵

Arthur Bryant also wrote on the British Empire for the Army Bureau of Current Affairs in 1941. There he portrayed Empire as an institution made by private individuals, by '...the ordinary Englishman [who] had formed the habit of going where he pleased and doing what he liked when he got there...Whenever his liberty to trade or farm as he pleased was challenged, whether by native princes or the officials of other European nations, he stood out and if necessary fought for what he called his rights.'⁶⁶ The role of the British Empire was now to prepare the backward peoples in India and Africa for the responsibilities of western civilisation.⁶⁷ Reasons for opposition to British Empire in the twentieth century included financial mismanagement and using the empire solely in order to get rich.⁶⁸ But the power of the British Commonwealth of Nations derived from its being an association of free nations, and this devotion to freedom meant that the dominions were prepared to fight 'as though the Nazis were at their own gates.' However, the small size of their populations in relation to their geographical extent made them weak.⁶⁹

A similar version of national history was produced in the *British Way and Purpose*. The chapter on the Empire asked 'how has it happened that a small island, in early times quite insignificant...has become the centre of an Empire spread over five continents and seven seas?'⁷⁰ But here the focus was on the Empire's present condition. After the brief account answering the historical question, the author went on to consider how the Empire was controlled, and whether Britain exploited it. These works reflected the importance of the Empire in British economic life as well as in its imagination.

⁶⁵ Stapleton, 162-64

⁶⁶ Arthur Bryant, 'The British Empire', (ABCA *Current Affairs*, no 23 1st August 1941) 2

⁶⁷ Bryant, 'The British Empire', 12

⁶⁸ 'The British Empire', iii

⁶⁹ 'The British Empire', iv

⁷⁰ *The British Way and Purpose*. BWP 5 'Commonwealth and Empire', 180, issued March 1943; consolidated edition of booklets 1-18 prepared by the Directorate of Army Education, 1944

Conclusion

The function of national history in wartime is to help construct the country as a unified national community that believes it can be victorious. The nation has to commit all its energies to the war and not dissipate them in internal disputes. In peacetime, historians are freer to look at alternative narratives and at different ways of constructing the nation. Episodes less flattering to the nation can be admitted more readily, although it remains hard to incorporate these into a generally accepted narrative.

During the war, the nation was of course at real risk. Versions of British history circulating before the war were those available to be drawn on during the war itself. The war lasted six years. There was no opportunity to create new versions. Nor were they desirable or necessary. Rather, as Peter Mandler points out, 'Popular history had a natural tendency to revert to consensus in the two world wars.'⁷¹ Robbins suggested that the British 'clutched at their history in time of need'.⁷² In the war, Britain was defending its values. To the extent that these were constituted by its history, older established histories were more useful because they helped to create the continuity that they celebrated. And just because they were old and established it may have been thought that it was not necessary to keep rehearsing them.

History was used to try to make the British more united than they in fact were. Wartime history was intended to create an inclusive patriotism, linking people together into an imagined 'we' who will fight and win. It also constructed opposing views of British and German national character and culture. The pamphlet literature and official history and propaganda in both the First and Second World Wars constructed the conflict as deliberately planned and executed acts of aggression by Germany, a view that remained the prevailing orthodoxy of historical explanation in Britain in the post-war decades. Demonising the Germans in this way helped to make the argument of necessary conflict more plausible. Rehearsing previous struggles helped to connect people in the endangered present with their glorious past and so create a belief that the nation that had defeated Philip of Spain, Louis XIV and Napoleon was the same that would defeat Hitler. In the historical writing of Bryant, Rowse, Trevelyan and

⁷¹ Peter Mandler, *History and the National Life*, (Profile Books 2002) 52

⁷² Keith Robbins, *The British Way and Purpose*, in ed idem, *The British Isles: 1902-1951* (Oxford: Short Oxford History of the British Isles, 2002) 98

others writing for army education, wartime England defined itself through its struggle and sought strength from reflecting on its past victories.

History was appealed to and used to help cement national unity, not always successfully. Although it is often believed that the people were very united – ‘we’re all in this together’ – official surveys of public opinion worried the government. It was feared that there might not be the unity they thought necessary to win the war. Evidence of industrial unrest and hostile reaction to caring for evacuees contributed to official concern.⁷³ Wartime propaganda helped create the self-image of Britain as ‘steadfast, resolute, good-humoured, and understated’. These values are still held by some to be those that characterise the British people.⁷⁴

On 18 May 1945, broadcasting to the nation shortly after VE day, Churchill acclaimed the role of history in inspiring the war effort and the eventual victory:

You have no doubt noticed in your reading of British history – and I hope you will take pains to read it, for it is only from the past that one can judge the future, and it is only from reading the story of the British nation, of the British Empire, that you can feel a well-grounded sense of pride to dwell in these islands – you have sometimes noticed in your reading of British history that we have had to hold out from time to time all alone, or to be the mainspring of coalitions, against a continental tyrant or dictator, and we have had to hold out for quite a long time against the Spanish Armada, against Louis XIV, when we led Europe for nearly twenty five years under William III and Marlborough, and a hundred and fifty years ago, when Nelson, Pitt and Wellington broke Napoleon, not without assistance from the heroic Russians of 1812. In all these world wars our island kept the hand of Europe or else held out alone.⁷⁵

⁷³ McLaine, 101

⁷⁴ Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War* (Routledge 1999) 84

⁷⁵ Winston Churchill, ‘Forward till the Whole Task is Done’, world broadcast speech, 13 May 1945 in *The War Speeches of the Rt Hon Winston Spencer Churchill OM, CH, PC, MP* compiled by Charles Eade vol 3 (Cassell 1952), 443

CHAPTER 5 HISTORY FOR A NEW JERUSALEM? 1945-1970

- 1947 Hamilton, Henry, *History of the homeland: the story of the British background* (Primers for the age of Plenty no 4) Allen and Unwin
- 1947 Woodward, E L, *History of England*, Methuen (Home Study Books)
- 1950 Feiling, Keith, *A History of England from the coming of the English to 1918*, Macmillan
- 1950 Jerrold, D, *England: past, present and future*, Dent
- 1950 Mitchell, R D, Leys, M D R, *A history of the English people*, Longmans Green and Co
- 1952 Gloag, J E, *2000 years of England*, Cassell
- 1954 McElwee, W, *The story of England, from the time of King Alfred to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II*, Faber
- 1955 Maude, A E U, Powell, J E, *Biography of a nation: a short history of Britain*, Phoenix House
- 1956-8 Churchill, Sir Winston, *A history of the English-speaking peoples*, 4 vols Cassell
- 1964 Halliday, F E, *England, a Concise History*, Thames and Hudson
- 1967 Halliday, F E, *An Illustrated Cultural History of England*, Book Club Associates
- 1967 White, Reginald, *A Short History of England*, CUP

The war was over. There was a huge sense of relief but also of exhaustion. Post-war there was a belief still in British superiority: in its parliament, its military might, its Empire and its position in the world economy. The nation continued to imagine itself with Great Power status alongside the USA and the USSR. This perception changed during the 1950s and 1960s as external events created an environment in which only the USA and USSR had the ability to act independently. Britain's sphere of action was slowly circumscribed although the rhetoric took time to catch up with the reality.

National histories took even longer: these narrative histories initially continued to reflect a concept of the nation as imperial, rural and democratic, but historians began to modify their narrative in the light of Britain's changed position in the world. Their approaches differed: some did not bring their accounts down to the time of writing, finding it impossible to incorporate Britain's altered position into a continuing account of the nation's greatness. One (Mitchell and Leys) focused entirely on the history of everyday things, avoiding issues of national identity; one (Hamilton) was concerned with learning lessons from the past to help build the 'new Jerusalem'; some (Feiling, Jerrold, Woodward) stopped their accounts before 1939.¹ Churchill's history stopped even earlier, at 1900, and by so doing indicated its old-fashioned character (it was mostly written before the Second World War). No historian wrote a comprehensive history of Britain from a Marxist perspective. The war 'shifted the life

¹ 'New Jerusalem': phrase used to describe the idea of a more equal society many after the war wanted to see created

experience of every mature historian working within its climate'.² Some authors had seen combat: Feiling, Maude, Powell. Even those who did not, were affected, like all British people, by the conflict. When the dust settled and they took up their pens again, most wanted to reaffirm Britain's greatness in a pre-war mode. Book production remained affected by wartime shortages. For example, publication of Hamilton's *History of the Homeland* was delayed because of paper shortage (the publisher, George Allen and Unwin, took from July 1946 until January 1947 to obtain sufficient paper for 20,000 copies), and J A Williamson commented in July 1949 that 'there is a long queue of books waiting to be bound' (his took 13 months).³

At first, the war experience overshadowed all. Psychological adjustment and practical problems created difficulties for writing national history. Precisely because the events of the war had been so destructive and traumatic, historians wished to reconnect the nation with its past and earlier accounts of its history. This reconnecting approach was the solution of conservative historians to the problem of how to write the history of a nation with the socialists in charge. Butterfield noted this English tactic to maintain the continuity of their history. After some rupture, he asserted, 'we actually build bridges in our rear, we seek to join up again, as though it mattered to us to maintain the contact with the past'.⁴ As Reba Soffer commented,

... most continued to understand history as a coherent narrative. The past was about the maintenance and transmittance of those institutions, laws, prescriptions, and proscriptions that guaranteed a distinctly British society. After the second World War conservatives were hard put to reconcile that reading of history with the wartime bombing of Britain, the liquidation of Empire, a socialist government, and the perceived threat to everything they called civilization. It was difficult for historians of the right to accept, let alone explain, events which culminated in the loss of 185 seats for the Conservative party.⁵

If however you were a socialist or even a Marxist, the times felt fresh: New Jerusalem was being built and new ways of looking at social structures seemed appropriate. The Communist Party Historians Group (CPHG) was established in 1946, initially to discuss a revision of A L Morton's *A People's History of England*. A revised edition was produced in 1948 and the book has remained in print ever since. Marxist historians concentrated on specific topics, rather

² Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past* (CUP 2006) 189

³ George Allen and Unwin papers, AUC 261/5 Reading University Special Collections; J A Williamson letters to Fulmer Mood, British Library Add MSS 5298 letters 2 July and 4 December 1949

⁴ Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and his History*, 101, quoted in R J White *A Short History of England* (CUP 1967) 9-10

⁵ Reba Soffer, 'The Conservative Historical Imagination in the Twentieth Century', 1995 Presidential Address of the North American Conference on British Studies, *Albion* vol 28 no 1, (Spring 1996) 5-6

than national history as a whole. For example, Christopher Hill worked on popular belief and culture in seventeenth century England and Eric Hobsbawm on 19th and 20th century protest; they and their colleagues vigorously debated the nature of English civil war and revolution in the seventeenth century, and the development of capitalism in Britain. The tercentennial of the English Civil War had been commemorated in 1940. Christopher Hill's work on the Civil War and English liberties argued that the English, like the French, had had their violent revolution that had replaced one social class with another. In 'The Norman Yoke' (1954) he claimed that England's inequalities were historically specific, resulting from the destruction of Anglo-Saxon freedoms by the Normans at the Conquest, and so could be remedied by concrete action.⁶ The members of the group wanted to present Communism as the inheritor of English popular radicalism.⁷ Most of the members of the CPHG (except Hobsbawm) left the Communist Party after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, and the New Left, with *New Left Review* founded in 1960, and CND developed as alternative organisations within which they could pursue their political aims. Identification of the nation with the people is a conceptualisation realised in Marxist work on English history and seen clearly in Morton's *A People's History of England*. E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* is of course a Marxist version; it is also a patriotic one.⁸ It provides a second instalment to Hill's 'Norman Yoke', this time characterising the Industrial Revolution as a disaster for English working people.

As the Cold War developed, Marxist and left-wing historians became involved in work of wider scope. The new journal *Past and Present*, intended to provide a vehicle for Marxists to talk to non-Marxists, brought social history and the concerns of the Annales school to English history. It was the publication where the debate on the position of the gentry was conducted.⁹ The position of the gentry was seen as the key to discovering what really lay at the bottom of the English Civil War, a debate Marxist historians viewed as particularly crucial.

A third approach of post-war historians to recounting national history was to continue the production of multi-volume series.¹⁰ Probably the major publishing initiative in the field of English history was the appearance of the Pelican History of England series. Begun in 1950 and

⁶ Walter L Arnstein, 'Christopher Hill' in *Recent Historians of Great Britain*, (Iowa State University Press Ames Iowa 1990) 60

⁷ Bill Schwarz, 'The People in History: the Communist Party Historians Group, 1946-56', 71, in *Making Histories: Studies in history-writing and politics*, ed Richard Johnson et al, (Hutchinson 1982)

⁸ Arnstein, 'EP Thompson', 129

⁹ Christopher Hill; R H Hilton; E J Hobsbawm, 'Past and Present. Origins and Early Years', *Past and Present*, no 100 (Aug 1983) 4

¹⁰ Such as those from Longmans, Nelson and Paladin

completed in 1965, it was the best known and the most widely sold in this category. In Britain the average sale per volume was 20,000 each year.¹¹ Further volumes in the Oxford History of England, begun in 1934, also appeared; one was published in 1943 (Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*) and four in the 1950s.¹² The series, originally of 14 volumes, was completed in 1960 and 1961 with works on the reign of George III and on the Fifteenth Century. The final volume, a later commission, *England 1914-1945* by A J P Taylor, was published in 1965. The General Editor of the Oxford History was G N Clark who was also chosen to edit the New Cambridge Modern History, which began to appear from 1957 onwards. Both these series appealed more to academic than general readers. The Oxford History continued an older approach to national history appealing largely to academic historians, and its continuation in the post-war period connected pre- and post-war history.

Initial post-war response to writing the national narrative

The temper of the time favoured a left-wing approach, as both Berger and Soffer note. Berger commented that the interwar period could be portrayed as a time when Britain was betrayed by its leaders, pusillanimous towards external threats, and callous and incompetent at home. A narrative focusing on the ordinary people who had pulled together in the war seemed appropriate. Soffer described the British left-wing view of the recent past 'as a chronicle of egregious errors, wrong turns, and the economic exploitation of the weak'.¹³ It is not surprising therefore to find that the first comprehensive synthesis of national history published after the war, in 1947, was Henry Hamilton's *History of the homeland: the story of the British background*.¹⁴ Written during the first half of the Second World War (in fact started pre-war), this was the last of Hogben's four Primers for the Age of Plenty, the others being *Mathematics for the Million* (1936), *Science for the Citizen* (1938) and *The Loom of Language* (1944).¹⁵

¹¹ Alfred F Havighurst, 'Paperbacks on British History', *Journal of British Studies* vol 6 no 2 (May 1967) 131

¹² Volume III: *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta, 1087-1216* by Austin L Poole (1951)

Volume IV: *The Thirteenth Century, 1216-1307* by Maurice Powicke (1953)

Volume V: *The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399* by May McKisack (1959)

Volume VII: *The Early Tudors, 1485-1558* by J D Mackie (1952)

¹³ Stefan Berger, 'A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France, and Britain from 1945 to the Present', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol 77 no 3 (September 2005) 641; Reba Soffer, 'The Conservative Historical Imagination in the Twentieth Century', 4

¹⁴ Henry Hamilton (1896-1964), Glasgow University; Jaffray Professor of Political Economy University of Aberdeen

¹⁵ Lancelot Hogben FRS (1895-1965), Cambridge University; Professor of Social Biology LSE; Professor of Natural History at Aberdeen; Professor first of zoology, later of medical statistics and human genetics at the University of Birmingham. His 'Primers for the Age of Plenty' series was inspired by H G Wells's *Outline of History*. (source: ODNB and

http://www.galtoninstitute.org.uk/Newsletters/GINL0112/Lancelot_Hogben.htm)

Hamilton, as the review in the *AHR* pointed out, understood history very broadly as the 'story of the life of mankind' and of how people have tried to provide for human needs.¹⁶ In his history he developed three themes: the failure of capitalism, the importance of economic and social contexts for historical understanding, and the failure of the national approach to politics and the consequent need for regionalism and internationalism. Each of these ideas was popular in the immediate post-war period. However, he thought that although mistakes had been made, in general the British could be proud of their history. The First World War had demonstrated that the resources existed to end poverty.¹⁷ Capitalism had been shown not to be an efficient system for satisfying needs or using resources effectively. However, the answer was not Marxism but a degree of planning in the economy.¹⁸ He believed that 'if we change our economic set-up' we can use fully our vast resources to feed everyone adequately.¹⁹ Significant advances such as the abolition of slavery and the reduction in the infant mortality rate have come about by general consent and general enlightenment.²⁰ The purpose of history, Hamilton argued, was to 'furnish us with rational grounds for hope in the future of the human experiment; but it can do so if, and only if, it helps us to shed traditional beliefs and customs which obstruct a lucid recognition of what is essentially new'.²¹

Hamilton secondly argued that history is not just the achievements of particular individuals: 'The story of the steam engine is meaningless if it starts with James Watt.'²² The economic and social background is necessary to understand the significance of inventions. Consequently he did not follow a traditional chronological approach but divided the narrative into broad categories such as 'Needs', 'Work', 'Institutions'. Many of his examples in *History of the Homeland* were drawn from England or Scotland, but much of the work was a general economic and social history of western European development. In the section on the development of transport, for instance, he drew examples from the wider history of astronomy, navigation, cartography and printing. He concentrated more on the history of England as he approached the present time. Changes in Scotland were frequently covered, and contrasted with those in England. (Hamilton worked at Aberdeen University and specialised in Scottish history.) English development was thus placed clearly in the wider

¹⁶ W O Ault, review of Hamilton in *AHR* vol 53 no 4 (July 1948) 805

¹⁷ Hamilton, 313

¹⁸ Hamilton, 150, 191, 237

¹⁹ Hamilton, 90

²⁰ Hamilton, 14

²¹ Hamilton, 19

²² Hamilton, 12

history of Britain (although Wales and Ireland are not treated separately) and of Western Europe, illustrating his theme of the interdependence of peoples and nations in the economic sphere.

Thirdly he argued that nationalism and the claim of every state to complete autonomy was now anachronistic and had led to international conflicts, exacerbated by national political history that had encouraged national competition and conflict: 'belief in the nation-state as the ultimate source of political authority has thus become a menace to mankind'.²³ These views were partly what lay behind Hamilton's conception that history is the story of co-operation and interdependence as much as an account of conflict. The challenge for the future, he thought, was 'to clarify what things men and women can do together in larger and smaller units of authority'.²⁴ This presentation showed Hamilton's response to the war, looking for approaches that supersede the national, as Barraclough urged in 1956.²⁵

Turning to the Empire, Hamilton was not comfortable about the British approach. In his section on 'Other Human Beings' he posed challenging questions about the actions of Britain in Africa where we should be exercising trusteeship more effectively. Our behaviour should

force us to ask how far the standard of life in our colonies has risen as a result of our stewardship. How far have we really helped the natives to adapt themselves to the changing world which we have brought to their doors? Have we given lavishly of our scientific and medical knowledge to these adolescent peoples for whom we have accepted responsibility?²⁶

Hamilton's book was self-consciously written to reflect new concerns of a world nearly destroyed by the failure of capitalism, nationalist rivalries and the misuse of technology. Hope lay in a future of regional, national and international co-operation. The history of applied science was one of interdependence and co-operation: the discovery of electricity and its uses was the work of Britain, Germany, France, Italy and the US.²⁷ History was more than past politics plus economics: its purpose was to alert us to new problems arising from our past actions.²⁸

²³ Hamilton, 342, 364, 471, 472

²⁴ Hamilton, 472

²⁵ Geoffrey Barraclough, 'The Larger View of History', *TLS* 6 January 1956

²⁶ Hamilton, 442

²⁷ Hamilton, 13

²⁸ Hamilton, 19

A very different, much more traditional work, which the *TLS* reviewer called 'the accepted view of English history',²⁹ was also published in 1947: E L Woodward's *History of England*.

Woodward was an historian of international relations and British foreign policy in the twentieth century, having edited, with Rohan Butler, *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-39*.³⁰ He had served in France in the First World War and in Intelligence and the Foreign Office during the Second. This background encouraged him to discuss the First World War at length in his *History*. In his review, Richard Pares commented that, although he found the account 'disproportionate', Woodward 'spoke to the present generation' through this extended survey.³¹ Other themes in Woodward's account also resonated with the contemporary situation. He commented, for instance, that William the Conqueror '...succeeded where for almost nine hundred years after him every attempt at foreign invasion has failed'. He compared the disorder in England during the Wars of the Roses with the current world situation, noting that '...as most of our present remedies imply the creation of some strong international authority, so at the end of the fifteenth century the remedy for disorder was the concentration of power in the hands of a strong monarchy'.³²

This is a short book, around 65,000 words, arranged in 18 short chapters. Although more space is given to more recent events, earlier times get a proportionate treatment. Many of the chapter titles are those of monarchs until the eighteenth century when Woodward's titles – 'Walpole', 'Peel', 'Palmerston', 'Gladstone' – suggest that ministers and their policies are the key to understanding historical change from around 1700. He thus implied, unlike Hamilton, that the role of individuals was essential and that the ability to influence events had passed from monarchs to elected representatives. Individuals were always important: he noted the nation's 'good fortune' that Alfred was young and vigorous at a critical time of Scandinavian invasions.³³

Woodward's book attempted to answer a question common at the time: why England was so much more successful than other European nations in establishing stability and prosperity. Part of the answer he offered was that 'once the evils of a forcible change of regime were over, the English had an advantage over their Continental neighbours in the establishment of a

²⁹ *TLS* 'England in Miniature', 28 February 1948, the author of the review is now known to be Charles Carrington

³⁰ E L Woodward (1890-1971) Oxford University; Fellow of All Souls; Professor first of International Relations, later Modern History at the University of Oxford; research Professor at Princeton; *The Age of Reform, 1815-1870*, in the Oxford History of England series

³¹ Richard Pares, review of Woodward in the *Economic History Review* New Series, vol 1, no 1 (1948) 80

³² Woodward, 22, 69

³³ Woodward, 22

strong monarchical government'.³⁴ But a strong monarchy created problems: 'The difficulty of controlling the king without recourse to the dangerous method of rebellion is the main theme of English history in the long reign of Henry III and intermittently for two centuries after him.'³⁵ Parliament was the guardian of our liberties: when Charles I ruled without parliament for eleven years, people feared lest 'Parliament would be unnecessary and the liberties of the subjects would certainly be "at an everlasting stand"'.³⁶ Cromwell's government imposed a strict regime on society. Woodward noted that '[t]here may be a moral in this history of the reaction of an easy-going, law-abiding yet turbulent people to large-scale political change and regimentation.'³⁷ The reader is highly likely to infer that the English might have reacted similarly to the imposition of Nazi rule. The realisation that the English reaction would have been a mixture comparable to that seen in occupied countries: collaboration, neutrality, or resistance, came much later. Woodward ended his account in 1918. Perhaps his work editing Britain's foreign policy documents for the interwar period and his war service in Intelligence led him to feel too close to the mass of material to be able to write an account of those events for a condensed history.

Another response to the post-war situation was to write social history. Rosamond Mitchell and Mary Leys are joint rather than single authors but adopt a shared approach.³⁸ Their book was social history, avoiding both political and economic history. The *TLS* review noted that 'the arts of history, as ever taking their colour from the contemporary environment, are quickly becoming socialised.'³⁹ The authors made links across time, place, and types of people, reflecting contemporary concerns with cohesiveness in society expressed in the Beveridge report and the work of T H Marshall. There was some material on town life, education, entertainment, medicine and the structure of society, but as Powicke noted in his review, in the main it set out to answer the questions people like to ask about what loomed large in the lives of ordinary folk.⁴⁰ The exclusion of economic history – the authors explicitly dealt with effects not causes – was partly remedied by the use of contextualising passages at the

³⁴ Woodward, 23

³⁵ Woodward, 33-34

³⁶ Woodward, 98

³⁷ Woodward 110.

³⁸ R J Mitchell (1902-1996) sister in law of M D R Leys with whom she wrote several social histories; M D R Leys (c1900-1967) Oxford University; tutor and Vice-Principal Society of Home Students (later St Anne's College Oxford)

³⁹ R J Mitchell and M D R Leys, *A History of the English People*, (Longmans Green and Co Ltd, 1950); *TLS* 29 September 1950; the author of the review is now revealed as Keith Feiling

⁴⁰ FM Powicke, 'A Welcome New History', *The Spectator* 13 October 1950, 386-87

beginning of each of the four sections.⁴¹ The authors argued that the 'strong and enduring tradition' of the countryside 'runs over and under and through the fabric of social history'. This they described as 'the warp and the woof of the pattern of English life that we have tried to weave from the brightly coloured fragments, left to us by chance, or cherished by those who love to contemplate the present in the light of the past.'⁴² The metaphor of the narrative of British history as weaving fabric created a sense of links to the rural everyday life of earlier people.

Conservative approach to writing British history in the post war world

The most significant historian, apart from Churchill, to write a history of England in the 1950s was Feiling.⁴³ Robert Blake characterised him, along with J R Green, Trevelyan, Churchill and G N Clark, as historians who have 'tried their hand at a continuous narrative of British history', a narrative he thought essential 'if history is to make any sense'.⁴⁴ His aim was 'to lay the emphasis on the period within which Britain became a great Power'.⁴⁵ As David Owen noted in his *AHR* review, Feiling wrote a traditional, political history that did not aim at analysis or interpretation.⁴⁶ It was conservative in wanting to emphasise Britain's Great Power status and in using a conventional political narrative. The narrative is end-loaded to devote just under half to the period from 1760. In these ways it connected this account with approaches and understandings of pre-war history. Feiling wanted to present a history of England that would take account of modern scholarship and that was not primarily an interpretation or commentary. He considered that modern Britain's existence depended on the break with Rome, which he called 'a destruction' since so much of the previous religious, economic and political aspects of national life was revolutionised. The modern nation was a united kingdom, Protestant, sea-faring and capitalist.⁴⁷ Like others writing at this time, he viewed England as a unique nation. He believed its special quality was determined by 'its government, the essence of which is the rule of law, one and the same law for north and south, rich and poor, Church and lay – a rule not framed in written rights, but in the body of remedies for wrong which will

⁴¹ Mitchell and Leys, 172

⁴² Mitchell and Leys, 736

⁴³ Keith Feiling (1884-1977) Balliol College Oxford; fellow and tutor at Christ Church College Oxford, Chichele Professor of Modern History, assisted Churchill with his *History*

⁴⁴ Robert Blake, 'A painterly vision' review of Roy Strong *The Story of Britain* in the *Sunday Times* 8 September 1996

⁴⁵ Keith Feiling, *A History of England from the coming of the English to 1918* (Macmillan 1950) v

⁴⁶ David Owen, review of Feiling in *AHR* vol 57 no 1 (October 1951) 122

⁴⁷ Feiling, 349

be enforced in the King's courts.'⁴⁸ Feiling regarded the common law here described as superior to Roman or canon law in protecting freedom. He did not think that democracy protected freedom; it might rather threaten it. Democracy was still seen as having dangers: 'that equality is apt to destroy liberty, and that democratic power tends to coincide with the physical force of numbers and to find expression in dictatorship.'⁴⁹ He was presumably thinking of Hitler's rise to power.

Feiling considered that the Empire was a force for conservatism, in contrast to democracy and liberalism, although it was not promoted by the aristocracy.⁵⁰ He valued and defended the Empire. It was made in the first half of the nineteenth century 'as the Anglo-Saxon England had been made, by the blood and sweat of forgotten human beings', 'families who staked their all for freedom and kept the faith'.⁵¹ He noted that the Empire was acquired through a process of founding self-governing colonies and was the unintended consequence of these settlements. However, Empire was wholly a good thing: 'Wherever we have gone an end has been made of torture, cannibalism, infanticide, and head-hunting, ...through many thousand dedicated individual lives, something better than the Roman sense has been given to "Empire".'⁵² Post First World War governance of the empire was based on 'trusteeship for the natives...long ago applied both in India and Africa'.⁵³ He was echoing Churchill's view of the centrality of the Empire to English national identity.

English identity was emphasised by Feiling's concentration on England alone. He referred to Scotland, Wales and Ireland only when events there affected the history of England, such as the English domination of Wales and Ireland in the twelfth century. He deplored what he regarded as the failure to unite the kingdoms of Scotland and England in the early fourteenth century. He thought that the division of the island meant that England remained a second-class power, although it also meant Scotland developed its individuality.⁵⁴ However, perhaps it was better to have postponed the union until the kingdoms were more alike in character.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Feiling, 142

⁴⁹ Feiling, 975

⁵⁰ Feiling, 955

⁵¹ Feiling, 863, 862

⁵² Feiling, 1101

⁵³ Feiling, 1102

⁵⁴ Feiling, 212

⁵⁵ Feiling, 419-31

Like Churchill, Feiling had started his history before the outbreak of the Second World War. He began planning his *History of England* in the 1930s but it was interrupted by war work and by his assistance to Churchill who was writing the life of Marlborough and the first volume of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. It was not until 1946 that he was able to resume work on his own history. It was dedicated to his pupils at Christ Church, Oxford. For Feiling, the period after 1918 is 'aftermath', and even that section is taken only to 1938. The title of his last chapter 'Peril, 1929-1938' reflects his implication that, as A J P Taylor noted in his review, 'British greatness ended in 1918... [now] the wall is crumbling, the barbarians are breaking in, nostalgia has taken the place of hope'.⁵⁶ All was 'confusion of thought, dire peril, and ill-requited intentions'.⁵⁷ Plumb noted that Churchill's history reads like one from the nineteenth century and criticised it for no longer speaking to the present condition of its readers.⁵⁸ The same could be said of Feiling's.

Another history that responded to the post-war mood by stopping at 1939 was Jerrold's highly idiosyncratic *England: past, present and future*. Jerrold was literary editor of the *New English Review*, had joined the January Club of Mosley supporters and in 1937 organised support for Franco in the Spanish Civil War.⁵⁹ In his *Sunday Times* review of Douglas Jerrold's book on 28 April 1935, Bryant observed with mock surprise that, although Jerrold was an Oxford First and a Fellow of All Souls, he was opposed to 'the ranged forces of big business, cartelisation, and monster trades unionism, bureaucrats, bankers and party bosses'. Instead, he pleaded 'for the alignment of a new and yet traditional Conservatism of the vast majority of Englishmen who love liberty and would, if they could, be what their forebears were, small freemen. With the plain man of the suburbs, the shires, and the provinces, he has a sympathy very uncommon in an intellectual'.⁶⁰ Jerrold thought that stopping at the outbreak of the war was appropriate 'because it is far too early to attempt even a summary history of the Second World War, while the events of the last five years are within the personal recollection of all readers old enough to vote'.⁶¹ Looking to the future he thought that it was absolutely essential that Britain retain its world role, including its Far East presence for at least 25 years, and play its role in

⁵⁶ AJP Taylor, review in *The New Statesman*, 6 May 1950, 518

⁵⁷ Feiling, 1120

⁵⁸ J Plumb, 'Churchill' in *The Making of a Historian: The Collected Essays of JH Plumb volume one* (Hemel Hempstead Harvester Wheatsheaf 1998) 241, 252

⁵⁹ Douglas Jerrold (1893-1964) Oxford University; director and later chair of the publishing house Eyre and Spottiswoode

⁶⁰ Reba Soffer, *History, Historians and Conservatism in Britain and America: The Great War to Thatcher and Reagan* (OUP 2009) 119

⁶¹ Douglas Jerrold, *England: past, present and future* (Dent 1950) viii

Christianity's reconquest of the world 'from its allegiance to false gods of the enlightenment'.⁶² Britain could and should remain a world power, but in order to reconvert the world, not to fulfil a mission of trusteeship. Jerrold's history suggests a comparison with G K Chesterton's: both deplored the state of the nation now that it was no longer truly Christian; but, as A J P Taylor commented in his review, Chesterton had a far greater passion for political liberty.⁶³

Although, as Taylor noted in his review of Jerrold, 'the conventional treatment of history as a record of steady progress has lost much of its force', a Stowe schoolmaster, William McElwee, continued that treatment in his book.⁶⁴ The somewhat old-fashioned, though still valued, approach was noted by Ivor Brien in his *Spectator* review.⁶⁵ It was, according to the dust jacket blurb, 'the first of a series of new books on the essential history of the separate countries of the Commonwealth and of the world, which has been in preparation for the past few years... designed both for the general reader and for the younger generation.'⁶⁶ McElwee traced English freedoms in the conventional narrative of Anglo-Saxon liberty, the development of local administration of royal justice, the 1688 revolution and the Bill of Rights, through the nineteenth century parliamentary reform (which in his view ensured there was no revolution in England in 1848), and, unusually, the rise of responsible trades' union power and reform of the House of Lords. McElwee found no difficulty in bringing his narrative to the accession of the queen in 1952. England had surpassed itself in its 'finest hour', and had, with the help of the Americans, won the war. Reviewers in the *TLS* and *The Spectator* refer to him as 'Major', in deference to his winning an MC in the war. Although difficulties still lay ahead, he claimed that 'By adapting her ancient institutions to modern purposes England has preserved her mediaeval liberties from both the extremes of current thought and has achieved a social and political stability unique in the modern world.' McElwee, like E L Woodward in his review of Butterfield's *The Englishman and His History*, referred back to Pitt's comment that England could save not only herself but Europe too, thus linking the present state of the nation with its glorious past.⁶⁷ He disapproved, however, of the 'cheap, mass-produced culture' demonstrated in the ruin of the English countryside evident in the mid twentieth century; England was no longer a rural place but a place of loss.⁶⁸ He and Hamilton both deplored the poverty and hardship which they saw inherent in laissez-faire capitalism. Gloag, who was not a professional historian but a professional architect, also wrote nostalgically about the rural

⁶² Jerrold, 328

⁶³ *TLS* 6 October 1950, 623 review by A J P Taylor

⁶⁴ William McElwee (1907-78) Oxford University; teacher at Stowe School

⁶⁵ Ivor Brien, *The Spectator* 25 March 1955, 366

⁶⁶ Information from Robert Brown, archivist, Faber and Faber

⁶⁷ McElwee, 259; E L Woodward, 'The English and their History', *Spectator* 14 July 1944

⁶⁸ McElwee, 225-6, 258

England we were losing through industrial expansion and making no effort to preserve; it was the slow growth seen in the countryside that conferred organic unity.⁶⁹ McElwee shared with Jerrold his assessment of empire. He regarded this as beneficial to the people living in the lands colonised: British colonisers 'gave peace and orderly government and a rising standard of living to huge primitive populations which had never known these blessings' along with 'the peculiarly English sense of justice and freedom'.⁷⁰

Conservative history of a different kind was being written by two Conservative MPs, Angus Maude and Enoch Powell.⁷¹ Maude and Powell envisaged the nation organically, with its history resembling biology or biography – hence the title of their work *Biography of a Nation*. They defined a nation as 'that which thinks itself a nation'.⁷² It was a self-conscious organism whose self-awareness is passed down the generations.⁷³ It also has a sense of unity so that the parts are subordinate to the whole. The authors use wartime examples to illustrate this: the inhabitants of the bombed cities of Coventry and Plymouth drew comfort from the resilience of other areas, feeling themselves part of a larger community; however, at the fall of France, no law of political union could have made one nation from what were plainly two.⁷⁴ The authors intend to describe the origins of being the British nation, 'how it grew and changed.... and how that consciousness is now again waning and its limits shrinking, as if some natural span were nearing its close'.⁷⁵ Being MPs, both authors were interested in the development of parliament.

Powell had early concluded that war with Germany was likely. It is not surprising that Napoleon is described in terms from which readers might infer parallels with 1940: 'Britain had successfully confronted the greatest military power and the greatest soldier known to history... [she had become] the arbiter of Europe and the world. The year of 1850 was one of decisive self-revelation.'⁷⁶ However, by 1919 claimed Maude and Powell, the nation had reached its zenith but the 'climax rapidly passed, and the reaction which followed it was swift and

⁶⁹ John Gloag, *2000 years of England* (Cassell, 1952) 44, 47

⁷⁰ McElwee, 221

⁷¹ Angus Maude (1912-93) Oxford University; journalist and MP; Enoch Powell (1912-98) Cambridge University; MP and government minister

⁷² Maude and Powell, 7

⁷³ Maude and Powell, 8

⁷⁴ Maude and Powell, 7-8

⁷⁵ Maude and Powell, 9

⁷⁶ Maude and Powell, 149

striking'.⁷⁷ Developments after the Treaty of Versailles placed parts of the British Empire in a new relation to the mother country and some, Ireland and India for example, wanted change.⁷⁸

Post-war historians were also agreed that the future of the British Empire would be a key development; but they were not agreed as to whether it would strengthen or weaken Britain. Maude and Powell's *Biography of a Nation* considered that the struggle over the American colonies was a 'conflict between local self-government and the unity of the Empire [which] had not been solved but only shelved'.⁷⁹ They wondered if, in the inter-war period, 'it would be an intolerable contradiction if ex-subjects of the defeated Ottoman Empire were to enjoy advantages denied to subjects of the King-Emperor'.⁸⁰ By the 1950s, the Commonwealth was no longer united by its members' relationship to the Crown. Powell argued that the Commonwealth linked nations only by accident, probably a reference to the changes in how different parts of the Commonwealth defined the monarch, amounting Powell thought to splitting the unity of the realm.⁸¹ Some members, such as India and Pakistan, were hostile to each other.⁸² Powell in particular was deeply disturbed by India's rapid move to independence and came to think that the Commonwealth was meaningless and should be wound up, with all colonies becoming independent. Britain was certainly no longer a great power, although it might have a future world role.

Simon Heffer commented that *Biography of a Nation* embodied the view that 'the British could make a new basis for their sense of nationhood if only they were prepared to make the effort'.⁸³ While the Empire had been important to national identity, in its new emasculated form it was not worth keeping.⁸⁴ Others comment that this history was written as an exploration of the origins and development of nationality but that it failed in several ways. The (unsigned) *New Statesman* review criticised Maude and Powell for not paying attention to 'nationalism within the nation' and for not discussing what the end of the Empire meant for English national identity. Nor did they appreciate that growing national feeling led to a corresponding national consciousness in other states with which Britain has contact.⁸⁵ English

⁷⁷ Maude and Powell 184

⁷⁸ Maude and Powell 188

⁷⁹ Maude and Powell, 175

⁸⁰ Maude and Powell, 188

⁸¹ Powell, speech in House of Commons 3 March 1953

⁸² Maude and Powell, 203, 204

⁸³ Simon Heffer, *Like the Roman: the Life of Enoch Powell*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1998) 194

⁸⁴ Heffer, 194

⁸⁵ *New Statesman* 3 September 1955 p 279; review by Rt Hon Walter Elliott in *TLS* 2 September 1955, 510

nationalism resulted in continuous expansion and military strength, but present developments ran the risk of weakening still further its already diminished status.⁸⁶

Churchill's history: 'Pageant enlightened by rhetoric'⁸⁷

Churchill is the only historian discussed in this thesis to have won a Nobel Prize for Literature. Awarded in 1953, the citation and the presentation speech both referred to his historical and biographical work. The prize was awarded before the *History of the English-speaking Peoples* was published so did not refer to it. Nor, to Churchill's great disappointment, did it refer to his *History of the Second World War*. It was clear that the prize had been granted as much for Churchill's war time speeches as for any history he wrote.⁸⁸ But his version of English history was more influential than many and by a writer with greater experience of politics and war than most. For these reasons it justifies more extensive discussion.

Churchill's history was different from the others considered here. It was longer in the making than most, being, like Feiling's, conceived and started before the outbreak of war and only finished afterwards. It differed from others also in that its author was a professional politician closely involved in the political life of the nation whose history he wrote. Churchill began to write his history during the 1930s, and had almost finished it when war broke out. He did a little further work on it in 1939 to try to meet his publisher's deadline, although for tax purposes and also because he did not want the public to think he was not devoting all his time to the war effort, he maintained that he had laid it aside.⁸⁹ Significant work on the *History* did not start again until the early 1950s, when Alan Hodge, the editor of *History Today*, organised several historians, including Asa Briggs, to make some revisions to volumes 1 and 2, the most finished parts, to restructure volume 3 and virtually to write volume 4 apart from the account of the American Civil War which Churchill had already completed. Earlier revisions by Denis Brogan in 1945 and much pre-war work by Ashley were overlooked or lost and 'much unnecessary originality displayed'. The result, Clarke tells us, was a 'hodgepodge'.⁹⁰ The work was eventually published between 1956 and 1958. When he was first drafting it, Churchill

⁸⁶ Maude and Powell, 188

⁸⁷ The phrase 'pageant enlightened by rhetoric' referring to Churchill's *History* is used by David Douglas in his review of the first volume of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* in the *EHR* vol 72, no 282 (January 1957) 89

⁸⁸ David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Writing and Fighting the Second World War* (Allen Lane 2004) 487-88

⁸⁹ Peter Clarke, *Mr Churchill's Profession: Statesman, Orator, Writer* (Bloomsbury 2012) 233

⁹⁰ Clarke, *Churchill*, 285

believed the nation was about to face being obliged to go to war. When it was being finalised, the nation had recently been in great peril. His perseverance in completing it despite being leader of his party and Prime Minister for some of the time is a clear indication of how important he thought it.

Churchill's was not the first work to appear with the title: *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, nor did the term 'English-speaking peoples' originate with him, and the idea of British-American co-operation for political purposes was not his alone. The phrase 'English-speaking peoples' came into common use in the 1880s and was most widely used in the 1920s.⁹¹ In 1917 George Louis Beer, historian and later one of the US team of experts at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, published a book called *The English-Speaking Peoples: Their Future Relations and Joint International Obligations*. In this he urged the creation of 'a cooperative democratic alliance of the English-speaking peoples' that would create a 'new and unprecedented form of political organisation which... will permanently unite them for the purposes of their common civilisation and ideals.'⁹² In 1943 Mowat and Slosson published in the United States their *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.⁹³ The term was also used by the English-Speaking Union, founded in 1918 to 'draw together in the bond of comradeship the English-speaking people of the world', as the American branch puts it. Churchill became Chairman of the English branch in 1921, having spoken at the Albert Hall meeting in London where the organisation was launched. In that speech he claimed the American Declaration of Independence as the third key document after Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights 'on which the liberties of the English-speaking peoples are founded'.⁹⁴ Pre-Second World War uses of the term encouraged trans-Atlantic co-operation in the political as well as the cultural sphere. By writing a history explicitly taking as its subject the entity 'English-speaking peoples', Churchill also urged this co-operation.

The sense of linkage that Churchill thought Americans and British especially felt and that gave the rationale to the book's coverage increased after the Second World War in which '[v]ast numbers of people on both sides of the Atlantic and throughout the British Commonwealth of Nations have felt a sense of brotherhood.'⁹⁵ Although there was a tradition of social history

⁹¹ Clarke, *Churchill*, 80

⁹² George Louis Beer, *The English-Speaking Peoples: Their Future Relations and Joint International Obligations* (New York: The Macmillan Co, 1917) extract quoted in review 'Towards International Reconstruction', *TLS* (6 September 1917), 422; the *TLS* Contributors' Index attributes the review to Sir John Macdonell

⁹³ R B Mowat and Preston Slosson, *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, (New York: OUP, 1943)

⁹⁴ Clarke, *Churchill*, xv

⁹⁵ Winston S Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* vol I (Cassell, 1956) Preface, vii

writing in England by the mid 1950s, anyone who imagined they would find social history in Churchill's book did not know Churchill – and everyone who read the book knew his ideas. As both J H Plumb and Julia Stapleton note, Churchill's 'people' are generals, admirals and statesmen.⁹⁶

Neither Churchill nor Mowat and Slosson in fact managed to write a history of English-speaking people. What they each wrote, as reviewers of both noted, were histories of Britain and the USA in one book.⁹⁷ Reviewing the final volume of Churchill's history in the *EHR*, H C Allen pointed out that 'there is a difficulty in the whole concept of the enterprise'. A real history of the English-speaking peoples would focus on the spread of language and literature. English emigration to the USA and the links provided by trade also served to connect the two countries intimately. None of this was mentioned in either work. Maurice Ashley further pointed out that a large proportion of the inhabitants of the United States from the mid-nineteenth century on were immigrants from eastern or southern Europe and from British-hating Ireland. Churchill cannot show how the African-American and Puerto Rican Americans share a common heritage with Britain, even if they were, along with immigrants from Europe, evolving a particular American culture.⁹⁸

A History of the English-Speaking Peoples constructed the nation as including all English-speaking people, emphasising its linguistic unity and base, and widening the concept of the nation. Although the ostensible subject was the English-speaking peoples, Churchill in fact alternated his focus between England and Britain, and the American colonies and the United States. His failure to bring these two together – and largely to ignore other English-speaking people – indicates that his interest and focus was on the political history of each nation, and not much on the cultural ties. America was presented as the child of England, taking its political and legal systems from the mother country. Americans adapted these systems to fit new circumstances, and in so doing remained closer to the original principles. The American War of Independence was fought '...for the same issues as had divided the English Parliament from Strafford and Charles I', and in the Declaration of Independence resulted in 'a

⁹⁶ J H Plumb, 'Churchill' in *The Making of an Historian: The Collected Essays of J H Plumb* volume one, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 242; Julia Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain*, (Lanham, Maryland USA: Lexington Books, 2005) 236

⁹⁷ H C Allen, review of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* vol IV *EHR* vol 74 no. 291 (April 1959) 307-308; 'English-Speaking Peoples: Anglo-American Treatise', *TLS*, 8 January 1944, 20. The *TLS* Contributors' Index attributes the review to Professor Denis Brogan

⁹⁸ Maurice Ashley, *Churchill as Historian*, (Secker and Warburg 1968) 222

restatement of the principles which had animated the Whig struggle against the later Stuarts and the English Revolution of 1688.⁹⁹

Themes: freedom, democracy, military strength, Empire

Churchill's book showed how he thought English history should be written. His themes were freedom and democracy, supported by constitutional monarchy, and national victory against earlier dictators. He regarded the development of colonies and the formation of the empire, almost in passing, as the natural sort of thing a nation like England would do. He covered in considerable detail wars with America and in South Africa about British control, but less comprehensively the acquisition and implications of the Empire as a whole. Ten pages only were devoted to the early settlements in America. What he was interested in was America from the time of the American War of Independence onwards. Canada, South Africa and Australia received less attention. Churchill's reason for concentrating on the English themselves and the Americans was that he understood them to be responsible for the defence of freedom in the world. Churchill's nation had valued freedom since the British opposition to the Romans: Boadicea's 'monument on the Thames Embankment opposite Big Ben reminds us of the harsh cry of "Liberty or death" which has echoed down the ages.'¹⁰⁰ Freedom was defended against the dictatorship of the Tudors, and Parliament grew in importance because it was used to confirm the sixteenth century religious settlements.¹⁰¹ It developed its role begun in the thirteenth century when 'de Montfort had lighted a fire never to be quenched in English history'.¹⁰²

Churchill's history was made by wars and wars were made by battles.¹⁰³ England's wars and battles were significant because it was through defending the nation against those who wanted to defeat it that the English nation preserved its freedom. Churchill explained how it was love of this same freedom and belief in self-determination that led the colonists in America to challenge English rule. He did not however see the same principle at stake in Indian claims for self-rule; indeed he opposed Indian independence in 1947. By his concentration on the role of individuals, especially military leaders – his ancestor Marlborough, Nelson, Wellington, but also statesmen such as Chatham – Churchill showed that, in his understanding, history was shaped largely by the actions of individuals. Among the most important of these were monarchs.

⁹⁹ Churchill, vol III, 115-6, 154

¹⁰⁰ Churchill, vol I, 19

¹⁰¹ Churchill, vol I, 395; vol II, 86, 113, 114

¹⁰² Churchill, vol I, 223

¹⁰³ Geoffrey Best, *Churchill and War*, (Hambledon and London 2005) 261

Churchill was very aware of the changing role of monarchy in the constitution: 'the core of English history lay in the struggle of its gentlemen against the Crown for their liberties, and then, when these had been won, in harmony with it on their forward march to wealth and Empire.'¹⁰⁴ Much depended on the personality of the sovereign; however, royal powers needed to be kept within their due limits and this was effectively done by Parliament.¹⁰⁵ Only two or three generations after its first being called, 'a prudent statesman would no more think of governing England without a Parliament than without a king'.¹⁰⁶ At the Restoration 'everyone now took it for granted that the Crown was the instrument of Parliament and the King the servant of the people'.¹⁰⁷ And so it remained. The role of George VI during the war and his solemn funeral and the later enthusiasm for the new queen, enhanced by the pageantry of the coronation and its promotion through both print and broadcast media, encouraged pro-monarchist feeling with which Churchill was greatly in sympathy. One of the advantages of monarchy for history lay in the way it could be used to represent continuity from the distant past, demonstrating the strength of our institutions and their influence down the ages. Churchill presented a constitutional limited monarchy as the best way in which English liberty could be secured. And not just English liberty. David Cannadine suggests that Churchill began to see monarchy as '...the best available antidote to the excesses of democracy, revolution, dictatorship, fascism and communism by which the world seemed increasingly blighted'.¹⁰⁸

Churchill's nation is also Protestant. This characterisation would have had even more resonance after the war when the history eventually appeared. The Second World War was characterised, as many political speeches, including Churchill's, reminded the British, as a defence of 'Christian civilisation'.¹⁰⁹ St Paul's Cathedral in London became a symbol of survival. It was called 'the parish church of the Empire'; Churchill wanted it saved at all costs – and it was.

¹⁰⁴ J H Plumb, 242

¹⁰⁵ Churchill, I: Preface, xiii

¹⁰⁶ Churchill, I: Preface, xv

¹⁰⁷ Churchill, II: 262

¹⁰⁸ David Cannadine, 'Thrones: Churchill and Monarchy in Britain and Beyond' in *In Churchill's Shadow: Confronting the Past in Modern Britain* (Penguin 2003) 84

¹⁰⁹ Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity 1940-2000*, (Pan Books, 2003) 28

Uses of the past

Churchill never had any doubt of the importance of history to the nation. For him, the point of this history was, by giving an account of past 'trials and struggles', to provide the means to 'comprehend the problems, perils, challenges and opportunities which confront us today'.¹¹⁰ He was clear that the purpose of history was to explain the present. But Churchill was the leader who had led the nation in war, and for him history's function was to encourage a view of the nation as supremely worth defending – again.

Churchill justified the use of the A bomb in *The History of the Second World War*.¹¹¹ Ashley thought that Churchill saw a parallel between Cromwell's attack on Drogheda and the dropping of the A bomb – both were ostensibly to save the lives of their own soldiers. (Ashley was one of those who assisted Churchill with the revision for publication of *A history of the English-speaking peoples*.) This reasoning can provide a justification of the past by the present: if the A bomb was justified, so was Drogheda. If moral standards were applied, they must be applied consistently. (Either the present day standards are used or they are not. And if a policy is condemned in the present it must also be condemned in the past. This attitude involves being able accurately to identify parallels between historical and contemporary events and this can often be contested.)

The book was dominated by a sense of England's heroic past.¹¹² Ashley thinks that Churchill does not attempt to draw an elaborate moral because he profoundly believes that 'history speaks for itself'.¹¹³ However, one conclusion that can be inferred is that Churchill would have liked both Ireland and America to have remained peacefully and democratically loyal to the Crown.¹¹⁴

Receptions

A History of the English-Speaking Peoples was very widely reviewed both in academic journals and in the mainstream press. Many of the reviews in the mainstream press were very complimentary including several by prominent historians. Reviews in the academic journals were more critical, although, as Feske commented, 'Churchill's academic reviewers never quite knew what to do with him. His work was unfailingly interesting but rarely if ever measured up

¹¹⁰ Churchill, I: Preface, xvii

¹¹¹ Maurice Ashley, *Churchill as Historian* (Secker and Warburg 1968) 214

¹¹² Ashley, 219

¹¹³ Ashley, 22

¹¹⁴ Ashley, 217

to the rigorous dictates of the scholarly branch of the discipline.¹¹⁵ David Douglas in the *EHR* noted the problem thus: 'A work of this authorship...clearly stands apart. And a reviewer, especially if he can rest under the somewhat unhappy title of "professional historian" must consider carefully by what standards of assessment its merits should be appraised.'¹¹⁶ Most reviewers were respectful, even when critical.

The critics' general view was that the work was patchy, with volume III, 'The Age of Revolution' covering the period 1688 to 1815, the least well received. It was criticised for being too concerned with warfare and descriptions of battles, all but ignoring major constitutional and economic events and movements. Some common themes in the reception of the volumes emerge. Many reviewers noted – and appreciated – that the history told us as much if not more about Churchill himself than it did about our history: 'Its main interest today should lie in the revealing study which it offers of Sir Winston Churchill "in his full maturity"', noted Henry Fairlie.¹¹⁷

The concentration on military history and detailed recounting of battles, especially in volume III, was contrasted, for the most part unfavourably, with the lack of coverage of social, economic and cultural history. Brian Inglis's review in *The Spectator* was even called 'Something Missing'.¹¹⁸ Some reviewers believed that Churchill's aim to write about both American and British history had been achieved. Referring to volume III, R R Palmer, writing in the *AHR*, noted that '...the distinctive aim of the book, to write of the English-speaking peoples on two continents, is successfully carried out'.¹¹⁹ Others were less satisfied, finding '...little attempt to describe the changing relationships of the English-speaking peoples across the seas, and that the author assumes, without argument, ...a fundamental consonance between the United States and Britain which enables him to conclude with an affirmation¹²⁰ of alliance and a hint of "ultimate union"'. Churchill's style was widely praised although some thought he wrote better when describing than narrating.¹²¹ T H White complained that 'the book reads as

¹¹⁵ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill: Private Scholars, Public Culture and the Crisis of British Liberalism, 1900-1939* (Chapel Hill, USA and London, 1996), 203

¹¹⁶ David Douglas, review of Churchill vol I. *EHR*, vol 72 no. 282 (Jan 1957) 88

¹¹⁷ Henry Fairlie, 'Churchill as Historian' *The Spectator* 27 April 1956, 584

¹¹⁸ Brian Inglis, 'Something Missing', *The Spectator*, 11 October 1957, 485

¹¹⁹ R R Palmer, *AHR* vol 63 no 3 (April 1958) 662

¹²⁰ *The Listener*, 20 March 1958, 509

¹²¹ Wallace Notestein, 93

if it had been composed on a dictaphone', and of course it had been largely dictated.¹²² In his later use of the work, Christopher Lee thought this was a virtue.¹²³

Later uses

According to Roy Jenkins in his biography of Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* had high sales: 130,000 copies for the first printing of volume I, with 90,000 more reprinted. The print run for the later volumes was initially 150,000.¹²⁴ It has gone on selling well ever since. In the 1960s, Cassell provided two shortened versions. The Reader's Digest decided to use what they termed 'condensations' of Churchill's history in their *Our Island Heritage*, a three volume history of Britain produced in 1988.¹²⁵ These were 'coffee-table' productions rather than serious re-workings of the original but they show how significant Churchill's history was thought to be.

The most recent use of Churchill's *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* was in the book and radio series *This Sceptred Isle*, a history of Britain from the Romans to 1901, the period covered by Churchill (see chapter 8). Christopher Lee, who created the series and the accompanying book, said in its introduction that 'In making the series we decided that we wanted "another voice" and by quoting Churchill when we thought the scripts would benefit from an illustration, we could change the style without confusing the authority of the narrative.'¹²⁶ Although Trevelyan's *History of England* was considered for this, in the event Churchill was preferred because, 'Lee suggests...it is both "accurate and written in a style that can be satisfactorily read aloud", perhaps because most of it was written from Churchill's dictation.' About a fifth of the text of Lee's book consists of quotation from Churchill. As we have seen, Plumb thought that Churchill's history read like one from the nineteenth century and criticised it for no longer speaking to the present condition of its readers.¹²⁷ However, the presenters of *This Sceptred Isle* disagreed that it was too old-fashioned and continued to use Churchill's version. Christopher Lee went on to produce, in 1998, a separate substantial abridgement of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* in just over 600 pages. Andrew Roberts has written an introduction to a new paperback edition of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* in which he stated that 'To the modern reader [the volumes] represent a

¹²² 'Sir Winston's Elephant', *TLS*, 1956, 705. The *TLS Contributors' Index* attributes the review to T H White; Peter Clarke, Churchill, 212

¹²³ Christopher Lee, 'Introduction', *This Sceptred Isle*, (Penguin Books, BBC Books, 1997) vi

¹²⁴ Roy Jenkins, *Churchill*, (Pan Books 2002), 900

¹²⁵ *Our Island Heritage*, 3 vols (Reader's Digest 1988), comprises condensations of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* by Winston S. Churchill and *Farewell the Trumpets* by James Morris

¹²⁶ Christopher Lee, 'Introduction', *This Sceptred Isle*, v

¹²⁷ Plumb, 241, 252

supreme achievement, nothing less than the great story of the Anglo-Saxon race as told by the greatest master of the English tongue since Shakespeare.¹²⁸ Churchill's *History* has thus had a greater influence than other histories written at the time. It has been re-presented in a variety of forms indicating that authors, historians and publishers think it valuable and significant in its narrative of Britain. As Stefan Berger concluded: 'Winston Churchill's *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, the most popular work of national history in the postwar period, proudly presented a romantic and imperial take on British national history in which the virtues of the Anglo-Saxon race had taken root in the white settler colonies of the empire and helped to spread British civilization to the four corners of the world.'¹²⁹

British national history in the 1960s: Halliday and White

After the proliferation of histories in the 1950s and the major publishing event of Churchill's *History*, the next decade saw three popular histories: two by F E Halliday, a Shakespeare scholar and historical writer, and one by R J White, a fellow of Downing College Cambridge.¹³⁰ Halliday produced a political history in 1964 in which he 'tried to emphasise the creative activities of man', and a cultural history of England, published in 1969. These are like less able versions of Trevelyan's political and social histories of England. Halliday, like Trevelyan, intended his cultural history to complement his political one.¹³¹ He referred to Trevelyan's definition of social history, emphasising art and thought, when setting out his intentions. While both books discuss cultural, political and economic aspects, in each the emphasis is different. Overall the impression each leaves is of a society successfully reconciling order and liberty while celebrating the high culture of English society and regretting its apparent decline in the post-war period.¹³² Although the *Cultural History* had only one imprint, the *Concise History*, first published in 1964, reprinted several times, and revised in 1989 to bring the account into the 1980s, is still in print. The comforting content and the many, often coloured, illustrations provide a reassuring account that still seems to appeal. Christopher Hibbert produced a similar version in a smaller format in 1992 with his *The Story of England*. Both were produced by

¹²⁸ Andrew Roberts, 'Introduction' to *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, (Cassell 2002 paperback edition), v

¹²⁹ Stefan Berger, 'Return to the National Paradigm', 643

¹³⁰ F E Halliday (1903-82) Cambridge University; school teacher and independent writer; R J White (1905-71) Cambridge; Fellow of Downing College Cambridge and lecturer in history (source: <http://archiveshub.ac.uk/data/gb012ms.add.8788>)

¹³¹ F E Halliday, *An Illustrated Cultural History of England*, (Book Club Associates 1967) 8

¹³² Halliday, *Concise History* blurb; *Cultural History*, 305

publishers specialising in art books (Thames and Hudson and Phaidon) who were able to include the lavish illustrations that added to popular appeal.

White's book was a commission from Cambridge University Press to an established academic historian.¹³³ The invitation does not explain why they wanted such a history at that time although the editor of the Press suggested that 'A large part of the sale for this book will be overseas.'¹³⁴ At first the text was judged to assume too great a degree of knowledge in the putative reader. He was asked to provide more facts and dates to clarify some of his allusions to make it more accessible to 'the ordinary au pair girl, American tourist or Nigerian student'.¹³⁵ White finished the book to the Press's satisfaction and it was published in 1967. However, its readership remained unclear. The *Times Literary Supplement* commented on the 'agreeable style' and noted that 'it is a book that can be enjoyed by the general reader and is not only designed for students'.¹³⁶ But at least two reviewers thought that too much allusion remained for non-experts to benefit from this history.¹³⁷

The story White related focused on how Britain became a pre-eminent world power and 'its notorious success'.¹³⁸ White regarded their racial mix and insularity as the determinants of the English character.¹³⁹ Consequently, he noted, the English have been confident in their history, sceptical about sudden breaks or the need for revolutionary change, and believed in 'freedom slowly broadening down from precedent to precedent'.¹⁴⁰ Thus freedom was also the basis for the strength of the nation in overseas exploration and expansion. White linked the faith of the English in gradually developing freedom with the 'island's immunity for nine centuries from invasion'.¹⁴¹ He constructed a conventional England, originating as '...a race of fair-haired farmers, brave fighters, poets and artisans in precious metals; the basic stuff of the English nation as it emerged into modern history'.¹⁴² White's England was successful in war and unconquered after 1066; a Protestant nation that thus 'became... a world power'; exceptionally fortunate in resources that it was able to use to become the first industrial

¹³³ R J Kingsford, Secretary to the Syndics, to White 6 June 1962 CUL Add MSS 8788/1B/3

¹³⁴ M H Black to White 24 January 1966 CUL Add MSS 8788/1B/14

¹³⁵ M H Black to White 9 March 1966 CUL Add MSS 8788/1B/15

¹³⁶ *Times Literary Supplement* 5 October 1967, 945

¹³⁷ Philip B Zaring, *The Historian* vol 30 no 4 (August 1968) 662; Aidan Clarke, review in *Irish Historical Studies* vol16 no 63 (March 1963) 369

¹³⁸ White, 2

¹³⁹ White, 3-4

¹⁴⁰ White, 9

¹⁴¹ White, 9

¹⁴² White, 42

power.¹⁴³ Constructing such a traditional narrative, White signalled that he thought Britain's best days were behind it and that it would be difficult for the British to find a new role. This national history might help by 'strengthening historical memory', by connecting present day British with their past.

White thought that by 1914 Great Britain's *raison d'être* was over.¹⁴⁴ His original plan for his history included little on the post First World War period. The Editor of the Press had been keen that he should bring the book down to the present day as 'An enormous amount has happened to this country since the death of Victoria and I believe the very largest matters ought to be touched on.'¹⁴⁵ This White found difficult. He commented that 'The British, the people of providential favour have lost, or have given up, an empire. Their part in the world in terms of wealth and power is passing into other hands. They are accustomed to reminders that they are no longer a first class power.'¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

After 1945 and during the 1950s war continued to dominate how people thought of Britain. Constructing a national identity that included Britain both as a victor in the conflict and a relative loser in political power and economic position was difficult. Writing national history up to the time of writing was a problem for the largely conservative approach adopted by historians of the nation up to the 1970s, since they generally wanted to continue a progressive narrative and this seemed contradicted by events.

The war required understanding in historical as well as political and social terms. World history seemed to be the way to do this, and various people, for example Geoffrey Barraclough in the *TLS*, made a plea for history that would transcend the national, to help get away from what was seen as narrowly nationalistic history that trumpeted the values of the nation state and which might have contributed to the war.¹⁴⁷ The feeling of the time was hostile to the Whig-liberal teleology that could not survive the destruction, death and industrial scale murder of the war.¹⁴⁸ This is probably why a number of histories of the nation published post-war (and

¹⁴³ White, 225-30

¹⁴⁴ White, 282

¹⁴⁵ CUP editor to White 29 December 1965 CUL Add MSS 8788/1B/13

¹⁴⁶ R J White, *A Short History of England* (CUP 1967) 2

¹⁴⁷ Geoffrey Barraclough, 'The Larger View of History', *TLS* 6 January 1966

¹⁴⁸ Reba Soffer, 'British Conservative Historiography and the Second World War' 379 in *British and German Historiography 1750-1950: Traditions, Perceptions and Transfers*, eds Benedikt Stuchtey and Peter Wende (OUP 2000)

several of their authors were conservative) stop before the war, in 1939, or even earlier. It was not easy to be a conservative historian in the later 1940s.

Oxford educated authors were especially well represented in the group of those who wrote popular national history in this period. Of 13 authors, only Churchill and Gloag did not go to university. Seven of the 11 who were university educated attended Oxford, three went to Cambridge and one to Glasgow. Two of the 13 were women, albeit women who jointly authored most of their publications. There seems no particular reason for women historians to have taken up the popular national history approach at this time. Of the male authors for whom there is information (eight), all undertook some form of military service in either the First or Second World War. Seven of the group became academics or schoolteachers, developing a familiarity with the process of conveying historical information to others that may have encouraged them to write down some of their ideas. The experience of being MPs on the part of Maude, Powell and of course Churchill, meant they were accustomed to what political life involved and so may have been interested to discuss its history and to present it as central to the life of the nation. Other non-professional historians included Jerrold, who was interested in politics, and Gloag interested in architectural history.

It is surprising that more left-wing complete histories of the nation were not produced since a social-democratic optimism was also apparent, but Marxist and Labour-supporting historians put their energies into writing other sorts of history.¹⁴⁹ Only two national histories were produced in the second half of the 1940s, and only one, Hamilton, tapped in to the progressive mood. During the 1950s seven were produced but attempts to write popular national history slowed markedly in 1960s. By the 1970s, the traditional approaches no longer seemed convincing. The romantic, imperial, patriotic narratives of Feiling and Churchill had less relevance for a world of decolonisation and the humiliation of Suez. McElwee and Halliday, for instance, deplored contemporary culture in Britain because they felt that it threatened the traditional values of high culture. The histories focused almost entirely on England (apart from that by Hamilton, who was born, educated and worked in Scotland, and used many examples from that country) and take little notice of comparable national feeling in other parts of the UK. The narrative generally concentrated on the political elite with little on social and economic aspects. Only Mitchell and Leys along with Halliday cover social history, although even that had not begun to adopt new approaches of 'history from below' being proposed in other areas.

¹⁴⁹ Obelkevich 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s' *Contemporary British History* vol 14 no 4 (Winter 2000) 128

While the fact that their character shared more the approach of pre-First World War than post-Second World War history was observed, and the relevance of these sorts of histories queried, no new versions were proposed to take their place. The 1950s was a receptive time for a traditional national history that celebrated British values, freedom, democracy, the rule of law and so on. After 1945, people wanted to affirm their identity as a nation justifiably victorious in war, and this history fed into that mood.¹⁵⁰ Although Cannadine claimed that Britain between 1945 and 1970 enjoyed a Golden Age in university history and in the development of British history as an academic subject, this flourishing did not lead, in the 1960s, to new histories of Britain for general readers.¹⁵¹ By then, there was greater concern with shaping the future than reflecting on the past.

The nation's changed international position was not yet reflected in how British history was written. But for a new sort of national history that could speak more relevantly to their condition, people had to wait until the changed state of the nation fully reached popular awareness. The nation constructed in popular national history was, as was often the case, lagging behind the reality. Only when the focus of attention shifted to ordinary people in history rather than politicians and generals, could a new national history arise.

¹⁵⁰ Weight, 23, 27, 112

¹⁵¹ David Cannadine, 'British History: Past, Present – and Future? *Past and Present* no 116 (August 1987) 170

CHAPTER 6 FOCUS ON POLITICAL HISTORY c1970-c1990

- 1971 Bowle, John, *The English experience: a survey of English history from early to modern times*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson
- 1971 Clark, Sir George, (G N) *English history: a survey*, Oxford, Clarendon Press
- 1972 Johnson, Paul, *The Offshore Islanders*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, (revised edition 1985 called *A History of the English People*; reverted to original title for 1992 edition)
- 1979 Rowse, A L, *The Story of Britain*, Treasure Press
- 1981 Ridley, Jasper, *A History of England*, Routledge
- 1981 Seaman, L C B, *A new history of England 410 – 1975*, Brighton, Harvester
- 1984 Bryant, Arthur, *A History of Britain and the British People*, Collins
vol 1 *Set in a Silver Sea*
- 1986 vol 2 *Freedom's Own Island*
- 1990 vol 3 *Search for Justice*

Political and economic developments in the 1970s and 1980s changed how the British thought about both their present and their past, and raised new questions about what sort of national narrative resonated within the contemporary culture. However historians only answered some of them at that time. Authors responded to concerns about the nature of society by developing the field of social history and applying it to the national narrative. But they made no response to the political questions in their recounting of national history until the end of the 1980s. Perceived economic decline, pressures for devolution and the new link to the EEC created a different image of the nation. It might have been thought that this changed perception would stimulate new thinking about the national story and doubts whether the traditional accounts still resonated in the culture. David Cannadine argues that 'changes in context and circumstance...led [in the 1970s and 1980s] to the rethinking of national history'.¹ But, as he recognises, historians only slowly developed new approaches to writing the history of Britain.

Context

Political and social background

The post-war period in Britain had been experienced as a time of full employment, rising living standards, and comprehensive and universal welfare provision. But in the course of the 1970s the rate of inflation increased, unemployment rose and strikes became frequent.² The

¹ David Cannadine, 'Nation', in *Making History Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies and Explorations* (Palgrave 2008) 178

² Kenneth O Morgan, *Britain Since 1945: The Peoples' Peace* (OUP Oxford 2001) 446

government seemed unable to control the economy or to solve social problems.³ There was talk of Britain being 'ungovernable'. For historians accustomed to the history of England as a success story, perceived economic decline and industrial unrest made writing a national narrative problematic. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the union of the United Kingdom could no longer be taken for granted.⁴ There was increasing nationalism in Scotland and Wales, and the re-emergence of intercommunal violence in Northern Ireland re-posed the Irish question and how the province should (or should not) be linked to the rest of the UK.

Immigration, especially from the new Commonwealth, grew more contentious during the 1970s and 1980s. Although the numbers coming to the UK were relatively small, many were from ethnic and religious backgrounds different from the great majority of UK residents and so were prominent because of their different appearance and customs. The immigration legislation of 1968, 1971 and 1981 aimed implicitly at keeping proportions of black and Asian people at an acceptable level.⁵ The perceived need to do this was driven by the idea that cultural difference created incompatibility. The issue was whether ethnically different inhabitants could become not only British by nationality but also fully integrated into British culture and society. There were many who thought they could not.⁶

Britain's relationship with other states changed. Entry into the EEC prompted reflection on how far Britain was European and how far state sovereignty might be lessened by being part of this political grouping. This question was reflected in political debates, including the referendum in 1975 that endorsed British membership of the European Economic Community, and in historiography, for example by Pocock, a New Zealander, who saw it as a crucial rejection of Britain's imperial and commonwealth past.⁷ Although Clarke suggests that sympathy with a European identity for Britain was increasing by the 1970s in that the referendum on EEC membership was convincingly won by the 'Yes' campaign, many British people remained half-hearted in their support for 'Europe'.⁸ Not everyone approved of the new constitutional arrangements or thought the arrangements were 'British'.⁹

³ John Turner, 'Governors, Governance and Governed', in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed Kathleen Burk (OUP Oxford 2003) 35

⁴ David Cannadine, 'Nation', 180

⁵ Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870* (Routledge 2004) 131

⁶ Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000* (Penguin 2nd ed 2004), 328, 329

⁷ J A Pocock, 'Deconstructing Europe' *London Review of Books* 19 December 1991; 'History and Sovereignty: The Historiographical Response to Europeanization in Two Cultures', *Journal of British Studies* no 31 (1992) 358-89

⁸ Morgan, *Britain since 1945*, 487

⁹ Clarke, *Hope and Glory* 346

Changes in education

The public's concept of the nation is also constructed through education, and the 1970s and 1980s was a period of education reform. Comprehensive schools became standard, and the number of students increased in the 1960s following the foundation of numerous new universities and the expansion of existing ones. The Open University (1969) provided access to higher education for many without formal qualifications. The number of history lecturers increased from 1500 in 1970 to 2100 in 1990.¹⁰ More people were studying and teaching history in higher education than ever before.¹¹ The dominant conservative political strain in British historiography was weakened by the presence of more non-Oxbridge historians; these were more willing to consider new approaches. However, the old universities remained significant.¹² Both Cambridge and Oxford expanded after the 1960s, with new colleges being founded and more students, especially women students, admitted. Cambridge had around 700 to 750 students of history at any one time during the 1960s and 1970s, compared with 1000 at Oxford and 600-650 at London.¹³ Many prominent historians who came to notice later in the century received their first historical training in Oxford in this period where they would have been required to study continuous national (English) history. Oxford's requirement of the study of continuous English history and the larger number of history students there probably contributed to the preponderance of Oxford educated authors of continuous English/British history for general readers. Of the 13 historians discussed in this and the next chapter, ten went to Oxford, three to Cambridge.¹⁴ They were at Oxford over nearly half a century, from G N Clark before the First World War to Paul Johnson who went shortly after the Second World War and Fry in the early 1950s. Oxford history education remained influential in the way historians constructed a national narrative, and more influential than the changing contemporary culture in which history was being written in the 1970s and 1980s.

With plans in the early 1980s for the introduction of a national curriculum, and its implementation from 1991 onwards, attention focused more sharply on the content of history teaching in schools.¹⁵ Debates began that continued into the 1990s and beyond about the function of history in national life, how history should be taught in schools and its relationship

¹⁰ David Cannadine, 'Perspectives' in *Making History Now and Then* (Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 24

¹¹ David Cannadine, 'British History: Past, Present – and Future?' *Past and Present* no. 116 August 1987 171

¹² Stefan Berger, 'The rise and fall of "critical historiography"', *European Review of History* vol 3 issue 2 (Autumn 1996) 213-232

¹³ Christopher N L Brooke (ed), *A History of the University of Cambridge vol IV 1870-1990* (Cambridge, CUP 1993) 230

¹⁴ Of the 13, Ridley read PPE; G N Clark read classics before reading history

¹⁵ David Cannadine, Jenny Keating, Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England* (Palgrave Macmillan Basingstoke, Hampshire 2011) 185, 193-7

with national identity and, more recently, citizenship. Historians as diverse as Raphael Samuel and J C D Clark contributed to the discussion in *History Workshop Journal*; other historians such as David Cannadine and Bernard Bailyn, discussed their views in *Past and Present* and *The American Historical Review*.¹⁶

Historiographical debates

These commentators and others analysed the state of British historiography in the 1970s and 1980s, looking both at how history was being investigated within Britain, and at how British history, the history of the nation, was being studied. Several of these considered that it was a challenging time to be a historian of Britain. 'The "Whig" interpretation...which explained the present in terms of an inferior but improving past, [had]....been so severely eroded that the turning points and the overall contours of the story have almost entirely disappeared'.¹⁷ The rise of social history, thought Cannadine, had encouraged a historiography without 'structural coherence' and without 'any central and agreed themes to the story'.¹⁸ It was suggested that the growing complexity and quantity of information had made it harder to create 'bold hypotheses'.¹⁹ Histories without such hypotheses were 'rarely more than one thing after another', 'an end-to-end assemblage of detail'.²⁰ But 'everywhere there [were] demands for new syntheses'. Consequently, claimed Cannadine, what was needed was 'a new account of our national past, which will appeal as broadly and as inspirationally in the less heroic and more mundane circumstances of today, as the welfare-state version did in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s'.²¹ Lawrence Stone too, in his article 'The Revival of Narrative', rejected an account of the historian as 'the simple antiquarian reporter or annalist' and called for one that 'possesses a theme and an argument'.²² The challenge for the future, Bailyn asserted, is '... how to draw together the information available into readable accounts of major developments'.²³ These accounts should appeal 'to a wider reading public, through synthetic works...that explain some significant part of the story of how the present world came to be the way it is'.²⁴ But, argued Coss, although the 'present ought to determine...the questions we ask

¹⁶ 'Special Feature: History, the Nation and the Schools' *History Workshop Journal* no 29 (Spring 1990); David Cannadine, 'British History: Past, Present – and Future?' *Past and Present* no. 116 August 1987; Bernard Bailyn, 'Challenge of Modern Historiography' *AHR* vol 87 no 1 February 1982

¹⁷ Bailyn, 3

¹⁸ Cannadine *Past and Present*, 167

¹⁹ P R Coss, response to Cannadine 'British History: Past, Present – and Future?' *Past and Present* no. 119 May 1988, 172

²⁰ Cannadine *Past and Present*, 182; Neil Evans, *Past and Present* no. 119 May 1988, 198

²¹ Cannadine *Past and Present*, 182, 187

²² Lawrence Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History', *Past and Present* no. 85 Nov 1979, 4

²³ Bailyn, 24

²⁴ Bailyn, 7-8

of the past...the past should not be called upon to validate the present'.²⁵ Writing which revamped Whig triumphalist history was harmful because it disguised what had really happened to Britain in the world.²⁶

However, the reality of Britain's economic and political situation was precisely what historians writing the history of the nation found so problematic. One solution historians adopted was to widen the scope of the 'nation' to include more groups: labourers, factory workers, servants, as well as the political elite. Race and gender were not yet categories of analysis in national history although gender was becoming included in historiography more generally. However, some historians, for example Briggs and Seaman, wrote narratives that integrated the social and economic aspects with the political better than before. Primarily political histories did not grapple with the changing politics of the nation at this time. The response of these historians to political changes was often to continue to write the traditional national narrative as a form of comfort and security. Bryant's romantic patriotism remained popular.²⁷ What is remarkable about most of the general histories of Britain written in the 1970s and 1980s was how traditional they were. In spite of devolution pressures, membership of the EEC and growing multiculturalism, and changes in approaches to professional history, especially the growth of radical social history, a customary account of the nation's past still seemed to resonate with readers of popular general histories.

Developments in political histories of the nation

Most conservative historians continued in this period to understand history as a coherent narrative focusing on institutions and laws that guaranteed a distinctly British society. They found it hard to accept a Labour government in Britain and loss of Empire as anything other than a threat to civilisation as they knew it. The myth of the 'People's War', important in creating the post-war 'consensus', was challenged by Corelli Barnett, giving intellectual support to Thatcher's wish to move away from the assumed earlier political agreement about the role of the state in welfare and industry.²⁸

²⁵ P R Coss, *Past and Present* no 119 May 1988, 180

²⁶ Neil Evans, *Past and Present* no 119 May 1988, 201

²⁷ Julia Stapleton, 'Sir Arthur Bryant as a 20th-century Victorian' *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004) 281

²⁸ Reba Soffer, 'The Conservative Historical Imagination in the Twentieth Century', *Albion* vol 28 no. 1 (Spring 1996) 5

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, conservative politicians and historians wished to reconnect the nation's identity with its history and strengthen a positive national identity grounded in historical narrative. In 1979, the historian Hugh Thomas published *History, Capitalism and Freedom*, described by its publisher, the Centre for Policy Studies (a right-wing think tank), as 'A powerful plea for a restored pride in our past, based on a reunderstanding of its greatness and unique nature. Such greatness was the fruit of our freedom, particularly our economic freedom.'²⁹ Mrs Thatcher, in a foreword to the work, wrote: 'A whole generation has been brought up to misunderstand and denigrate our national historyfor the blackest picture is drawn by our Socialist academics and writers of precisely those periods of our history when greatest progress was achieved compared with earlier times, and when Britain was furthest in advance of other nations'.³⁰ Conservative historians such as Geoffrey Elton and Maurice Cowling supported this view, although they took different approaches to it. Elton argued for traditional, narrative political history based on empirical research with people's actions as the drivers of historical change, not 'this non existent history of ethnic entities and women', whereas Cowling led the 'rearguard action' in favour of 'high political' history.³¹ At the same time, studies of popular politics from a conservative perspective increased, and came to be seen as a way to investigate the wider worlds of political ideas and social structure.³² As we have seen, the rise of social history was creating an alternative national narrative and encouraging the integration of social and political history. The nation state also seemed less important as globalisation and consumerism developed. Traditional political history came to attract fewer historians.³³

Narrators' purposes

The aims of the authors whose histories are discussed in this chapter are similar to those stated by earlier authors. Two in particular are cited here: to correct deficiencies in school

²⁹ Blurb from Centre for Policy Studies <http://www.cps.org.uk/cgi-bin/ss000004.pl?RANDOM=NETQUOTEVAR%3ARANDOM&PAGE=SEARCH&GB=A&SS=history+capitalism+and+freedom&ACTION=Search&TB=A>

³⁰ Quoted in Vivienne Little, 'A National Curriculum in History: A Very Contentious Issue', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol 38, no 4 (Nov 1990) 326

³¹ Geoffrey Roberts, 'Defender of the Faith: Geoffrey Elton and the Philosophy of History', *The Historian*, no 57, Spring 1998; Elton's remarks quoted in David Cannadine, 'British history: Past, Present – and Future?', *Past and Present* no 116 (August 1987) p 188; Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role: The United Kingdom 1970-1990* (Clarendon Press Oxford 2010) 401

³² Jon Lawrence, 'Political history' in ed Berger, Stefan, Heiko Feldner, Kevin Passmore, *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, (Hodder Arnold 2003) 192-93

³³ Steven Fielding, 'Political History' http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/themes/political_history.html [accessed 12 March 2012]

history teaching and, focusing on history's social function, to provide some guidelines for the present situation and some pointers to where Britain might be going. These aims are common to most popular history accounts but were worked out in new ways in this period.

Perceived problems concerning history education were the reason for some books: both Seaman and Bryant identified deficiencies in school history – it was too fragmented, covered too little, focused too much on skills – that they thought an overview could help remedy.³⁴ The authors of these histories thought that a synoptic view, providing 'a general grasp', would enable historians to fulfil their duty to teach people their history 'in a form they can grasp'.³⁵ They wished to draw out a wider meaning for the general readers who 'continue to demand history as story'.³⁶

One important way in which readers understood the wider significance of national history was as an aid to understanding the present and as an influence on ideas about the future. Both Johnson and Bryant approached national history in this way. Johnson asked why a journalist should write a history of the English people. He answered that a journalist seeks in the past the origins of events he reports in the present.³⁷ He described the 1960s as the decade in which Britain finally fell behind in strength and prosperity. This decline led him to wonder 'what sort of people did the English wish to be, and what kind of country did they prefer to inhabit?'.³⁸ To give a worthwhile comment on this issue, he felt that it was 'necessary to explore their history back to its very roots'.

Similarly, Bryant thought that it was because British people were confused and divided about what their future should be that they needed an account of their past that recalled its meaning and greatness in order to inform their vision of the future. Unfortunately, in his opinion, 'more than one generation has grown up without... [a] popular awareness of the nation's history'.³⁹ 'What above all seems needed today is a complete social and political history of the country for readers of all ages, but particularly for the young.' History was also needed, he thought, to guide the majority in exercising democracy because cumulative guidance and inherited corporate experience lay in the past. His history 'traces the creation and evolution of the laws,

³⁴ Seaman, xix; Bryant *History of Britain and the British People* vol 1 *Set in a Silver Sea* (Grafton Books 1985) 16

³⁵ Johnson, 6

³⁶ Briggs, x

³⁷ Paul Johnson, *The Offshore Islanders: a History of the English People* (Phoenix Giant paperback, imprint of Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1985) 3, 4

³⁸ Johnson, 5

³⁹ Arthur Bryant, vol 1, 15-16

institutions, moral beliefs and attitudes which, instinctively governing us from the past, still form the basis our continuing nationhood.⁴⁰

Just as Bryant thought that Britain needed an account of its history that recalled its great past in order to inform its vision of the future, so some thought that the aim of a contemporary national history was to help the British understand where they were now. When the nation's present state was undesirable, one of the tasks of history could be to help understand how it arrived at its present situation and to find a way towards a better future. Thus Seaman wanted 'to see the present in its historical context ... which all historians ought to try to do since it is a task for which their discipline might be expected to equip them.'⁴¹ Johnson also thought that history should 'relate present to past and on the basis of this connection to make some tentative projections into the future'.⁴² He also claimed that 'Each age makes a different analysis of what has gone before, and extracts from it significant pointers, lessons and warnings.'⁴³ This was also E H Carr's view of history, as a 'dialogue between the present and the past' which Johnson quoted. Other historians were more concerned to celebrate the English example. A L Rowse declared: 'The story of Britain is that of an island which has influenced the outside world more than any island in history.'⁴⁴

Other historians told their readers what they intended to do but not their purpose in doing it. Seaman noted that in spite of increasing specialisation among academic historians, popular interest in history was increasing. History, he believed, had a social function: to answer the question 'What has been the history of England so far?' He claimed that this question had not been answered recently, so he offered a survey of English history over the past 15 centuries in which he 'tried to trace some of the main trends in political, economic and social history as they have affected people as a whole.'⁴⁵

Bowle considered that the previous 'traditional Whig-Liberal interpretation' had fragmented following new research and new emphases on social and economic history. He wondered whether 'some new and unifying theme may not emerge'. He acknowledged that 'narrative history is out of fashion', but defended his version on grounds of the need for 'a general

⁴⁰ Bryant vol 1, 19

⁴¹ Seaman, xx

⁴² Johnson, 5-6

⁴³ Johnson, 8

⁴⁴ A L Rowse, *The Story of Britain*, (Treasure Press 1979) 7

⁴⁵ Seaman, xx

grasp'. Bowle was the only author in this group to refer to the lack of relevance of older versions of the national narrative and to justify his account on those grounds.

G N Clark aimed to trace the origins of the English as a community but his failure to define community weakened his survey. He in fact wrote about the conventional collection of kings, nobles, bishops, and military and political leaders. Other possible members of the English community – peasants, workers, writers, artists, women – were excluded. A one-volume history of England to be published by OUP was first suggested to Clark by Dan Davin, Assistant Secretary to the Delegates of the OUP, in July 1962.⁴⁶ He noted that 'For years we have been urged by the book-trade to produce a one-volume history of England which would use and represent some of what is in OHE [*Oxford History of England*]. We tried various schemes without making much progress and in the end G N Clark decided he would have a go himself.'⁴⁷ Clark was reported to be 'rather keen on the plan especially if some way can be found of enabling the social and economic matter to be predominant'.⁴⁸ However, when it was finally published its content was notably political. Davin was confident that 'whatever he does will be done well'.⁴⁹ Clark was reported by Davin as saying that the book 'follows modern taste in giving more space to later times than earlier...that it treats Scotland, Wales, Ireland, India etc at some length but only from the point of view of English history, and that his basic theme is how England became a community, what sort of community it was, and how it was associated with countries outside itself'.⁵⁰ Robert Blake, whose opinion had been sought, was in no doubt that OUP should publish it; he expected it to be 'a notable success and to have a wide readership'.⁵¹ Others also expected it to sell well. OUP's publisher John Brown in London referred to 'such a potentially wide appeal'.⁵² The American branch of OUP in New York thought that sales could be good if it were suitable for college courses as 'there is no really satisfactory textbook', although C Warren Hollister at the University of California, who was also sent a manuscript for comment, doubted its 'pedagogical effectiveness for an American student audience'.⁵³ It was published on 20 May 1971.

⁴⁶ OUP Box OP3192 Ref 021570 Sir George Clark A Survey of the History of England [hereafter OUP Clark Survey archive]

⁴⁷ Davin to Robert Blake, Provost of Queen's College, 17 December 1969 OUP Clark Survey archive

⁴⁸ Davin memo 1 August 1962 OUP Clark Survey archive

⁴⁹ Davin memo 10 November 1965 OUP Clark Survey archive

⁵⁰ Davin to Blake, 17 December 1969

⁵¹ Robert Blake to Davin 27 February 1970 OUP Clark Survey archive

⁵² John Brown OUP Ely House London to Davin 17 November 1970 OUP Clark Survey archive

⁵³ Byron S Hollinshead [BSH] New York to Davin 10 March 1970; BSH to Davin 24 June 1970 OUP Clark Survey archive

Sales started well: the publisher reported that booksellers had started receiving quantity orders from schools even before publication.⁵⁴ However, in spite of the reasonable price (£2 – volumes of the Oxford History were priced at 55s each) and the eminence of the author, the book did not succeed as hoped. By September 1972 Davin admitted to Clark that sales were disappointing.⁵⁵ Perhaps for this reason the Press engaged in discussions with Book Club Associates about the Club bringing out its own edition although the negotiations did not lead to such an edition. Clark's *English History: A Survey* had a final lease of life as a large format book now called *The Illustrated History of Britain* under the Octopus imprint, part of W H Smith. Tom Edwards, the publishing manager of Octopus, proposed omitting the first chapter as it was 'of a general nature and has been described as "opaque"'. In addition, he wanted to commission Dr J N Westwood to expand and rewrite the last three chapters and arrange illustrations. In March 1981 the Press informed Martin Clark (G N Clark's son) that the contract with Octopus had been signed.⁵⁶ G N Clark had died in 1979.

In writing accounts of national history that appealed to readers in the 1970s and 1980s, authors were keen to show that the past had a resonance in the present and that the present informed the future. Such an approach was particularly appropriate when the national narrative, as Bowle perceived, was believed to be in flux and when 'a sharp and sustained economic downturn together with political violence encouraged a sense that the good times had gone, perhaps permanently'.⁵⁷ They seemed to be trying to provide stability in a changing world.

How the nation is constructed

These histories were histories of England rather than Britain. Of the seven works being considered here, five have the term 'England' or 'English' in the title; two have 'Britain' or 'British'. Other parts of the United Kingdom were included only when events in them directly affected those in England. For example, Edward I's efforts to bring Scotland and Wales within English control were covered by all these accounts. Scotland and Ireland were brought into the narrative in all these histories when the Civil War was discussed; events in those places

⁵⁴ John Brown publisher to Davin 1 June 1971 OUP Clark Survey archive

⁵⁵ Davin memo 29 September 1972 OUP Clark Survey archive

⁵⁶ OUP Clark Survey archive

⁵⁷ John Bowle (1905-1988), school teacher, then taught at the College of Europe, Bruges; *The English Experience: A Survey of English History from Early to Modern Times* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1971) vii; Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (Vintage Books 2010) 477

directly affected the course of affairs in England. Historians traced the origins of the way Scotland and Wales, and in some cases Ireland, came under English political control, then became politically united with England. These authors did not address the high degree of contingency accompanying the formation of these links.

Turning to the histories themselves, only Seaman clearly explained why his history was confined to England: pragmatically '[t]o keep the book within reasonable length.'⁵⁸ The other histories discussed here assumed, without justification, that England was the obvious category for national history. All the narratives contained material on Scotland, Wales and Ireland. In Bowle's history, called *The English Experience*, he intended to 'survey... the entire range of English history'.⁵⁹ His narrative contained quite a lot on Scotland, Wales and Ireland, but all from an English point of view. Wales dropped out of the picture after C16; Scotland's Act of Union with England was not mentioned, and it dropped out of the narrative after the C17. Bowle's approach implied the submergence of Wales and Scotland within a polity called England/Britain. Ireland got more attention, including the union in 1800 and the separation in 1922. There is no discussion of the wider significance of the links amongst the four nations.

Clark stated that 'The purpose of this book is to show how the English people came to form a community; what kind of community it has been in its successive stages of development; and what have been its relations with other communities to which English people have belonged.' Other separate communities included Scotland, Wales and Ireland, France, churches and other political communities. Clark included them 'in as far as they explain the growth and action of England'. He thus made explicit that this history concerned England only, not Great Britain or the British Isles.⁶⁰ However, he thought that 'The union with Scotland was the greatest among many movements which unified the island and bound it together in social and economic co-operation.'⁶¹

Johnson emphasised that England gained its essential frontiers as early as the eighth century since neither the Romans nor the Normans advanced into Wales and Scotland.⁶² While English became the dominant language in all three areas, England never achieved cultural ascendancy

⁵⁸ Seaman, *A New History of England 410 – 1975* (Harvester Press Brighton 1981) xx

⁵⁹ Bowle, vii

⁶⁰ G N Clark, *English history: a survey* (Oxford Clarendon Press 1971) v

⁶¹ Clark, 347

⁶² Johnson, 100

or the destruction of the Welsh and Scottish sense of national identity. 'Thus the racial antagonism, based on an arrogant sense of cultural superiority, which the English felt for the Celts, was sharpened by the fear that England was always the potential victim of a conspiracy of encirclement.'⁶³ England's relation to the other nations in Britain was and remained ambivalent.

He did not have a good word to say about the English in Ireland. Their presence was part of the misguided and unfortunate attempts to extend their influence outside their own borders. The nation whose history he was writing never included Ireland; that island was only ever a colony, never integrated culturally in spite of attempts to include it politically. Johnson discussed the extent of the nation in the eighteenth century from the point of view of England's advantage. Scotland brought votes to Westminster, and the lowlands at least became a flourishing part of the community.⁶⁴ However, neither Ireland nor the American colonies became incorporated into the wider polity, Ireland because it was deliberately excluded, and the American colonies because of the implications for the English parliamentary system, as well as the difficulties of negotiating satisfactory representation arrangements at such a distance from the seat of government.

Ridley's history, called *The History of England*, sketched Roman Britain under the heading 'Britain before the English', clearly constructing the subject of his history as England. Such a construction continued through the history. Scotland's and Ireland's role in the Civil War are referred to, but only insofar as they played a role in an English conflict. So unimportant was Scotland in Ridley's narrative that the Act of Union in 1707 was not discussed. The Act of Union with Ireland in 1800 was described as enabling Britain to 'tighten its control' over that nation; having Irish MPs at Westminster was like having Scottish ones. The very different reasons for these two unions are not referred to.⁶⁵ Like Schama later, Ridley drew parallels between the English treatment of India and Ireland: both are marked by negotiation, repression and concession.⁶⁶

'To keep the book within a reasonable length', Seaman's volume was 'predominantly a history of the English in England'. The history continued to relate only to England after 1707; there was little on Scotland, Wales or Ireland. The effect of the Act of Union with Scotland was to

⁶³ Johnson, 101

⁶⁴ Johnson, 226

⁶⁵ Ridley, 238

⁶⁶ Ridley, 278-80

liberate 'the English from their ancient fear of a Scottish alliance with a continental enemy'.⁶⁷ Seaman presented union with Ireland as an episode in the relations of George III with his ministers, rather than as creating a different sort of nation.⁶⁸

Although Bryant's history was called *A History of Britain and the British People*, it was a version of 'our island story'. On occasion he still used the terms 'Britain' and 'England' interchangeably as if they referred to the same entity, referring to 'The English [who] plainly loved their country' and on the next page to the 'British constitution', followed by a discussion of how 'the English left every Parliament free to change the laws as they chose. They would not be bound even by a Constitution'.⁶⁹ As Stapleton noted, Bryant presumed a homogeneous sense of national identity across Britain.⁷⁰ Although Bryant tended to conflate England and Britain, he considered that what he calls 'the triumph of Protestantism' created 'a single island bound together by a common Protestantism' that proved 'a decisive step in the creation of a new political entity in the world – Great Britain'.⁷¹ Bryant shared with Churchill an obsession with defining the English tradition, which he conceptualised as a tradition of romantic patriotism, military triumphs and imperial expansion.⁷²

In spite of the violence in Northern Ireland at this time and the devolution pressures in Scotland and Wales, these historians did not widen their conception of the nation to include areas other than England: the history remained Anglo-centric. These historians saw the nation as they always had, as England, and were not much interested in Scotland, Wales or Ireland. A declining world position following decolonisation led to historians devoting less space to Britain as the British Empire. Even Seaman noted in his Introduction that, since his book 'says less than it might have done about the extraordinary achievements of [the] empire builders', it was a book that 'could not have been written even thirty years ago'.⁷³ So much had the character of the nation changed since the end of the Second World War that the empire, even before decolonisation, no longer formed part of its self-image.

⁶⁷ Seaman, 319

⁶⁸ Seaman, 331

⁶⁹ Bryant vol 3, 1-3

⁷⁰ Julia Stapleton, 'Sir Arthur Bryant as a 20th-century Victorian' *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004) p 227

⁷¹ Arthur Bryant, *History of the British people* vol 2, 61

⁷² Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* 2nd ed (Cambridge: CUP 2004) 105

⁷³ Seaman, xx

Themes

Historians who constructed the subject of their accounts in a traditional, Anglo-centric way also concentrated their narratives around traditional themes of freedom, Protestantism, and England's civilising mission. Within this broad characterisation there were different emphases. Flexibility and ability to adapt to new situations without losing essential structures were emphasised, and some constructed greater integration of economic and social aspects within what were primarily political histories.

Arthur Bryant *A History of Britain and the British People*

Arthur Bryant wrote the history of England several times. After the Second World War he produced three versions, only the last of which was anything like complete. The last version of the history of England, his *History of Britain and the British People* (1984-90), was largely a reworking of text from *Makers of the Realm* (1953), *The Age of Chivalry* (1963), *The Medieval Foundation* (1966), and *Protestant Island* (1967). As he noted in the Introduction to *Set in a Silver Sea*, he had seven histories of specific periods to draw on.⁷⁴ The only part of the *History of Britain and the British People* not drawn from Bryant's earlier work was the section on the events of 1688 and the Revolution settlement which was contributed by John Kenyon. Bryant thought the 1688 settlement a wrong turning because it diminished the power of the monarchy in the English constitution and so removed an important safeguard for the people against the executive.⁷⁵

Bryant wrote as a Christian believer. He was not impartial about the benefits of the faith to the nation. 'The most important element in our history has been the continuity of the Christian tradition', he wrote, because it was through this tradition that Britain had developed a polity in which individuals were regarded as more important than the state, and in which power was in the hands of the many rather than the few.⁷⁶ The main theme of English history was thus the development of individual liberty under the law and the creation of ways to curb rulers' political power. England achieved greatness through taking its values and trade to a wider world and thus becoming a world power. Bryant had 'unwavering conviction that a self-conscious and unified English nation was the common subject of both medieval and modern history, and remained – potentially at least – a moving force in the present'.⁷⁷ Bryant's English were 'proud and independent, accustomed to manage their own affairs and resentful of

⁷⁴ *Set in a Silver Sea*, 18

⁷⁵ Julia Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland, USA 2005) 277, 279

⁷⁶ *Set in a Silver Sea*, 26

⁷⁷ Julia Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History*, 242

interference.' These were 'the enduring values of England'. They disliked extremes, preferring '...a clear, simple, middle way, easy for moderate men to follow and therefore typically English'.⁷⁸ He agreed with other historians that 'Every generation needs its popular history written in a way it can understand.' 'Trying to write it [the history of England] for [my time] I have presented it in a new and different form. For my *History* contains fewer purely political events and Acts of Parliament, but dwells longer on certain deeds and words which have stirred the hearts of the English and British and awoken their imagination.'⁷⁹ He claimed here to be writing a truly comprehensive national history.

Bryant wrote at length on military and naval history. He was interested from childhood in military and naval exploits.⁸⁰ His service in World War I stimulated his interest in military history at Oxford in 1919-20. Bryant describes battles, on land and sea, at length. Although the accounts are very detailed, they contain little on the wider significance of particular conflicts. In these ways, Bryant's historical writing had ceased to keep pace with contemporary historiography and marked him out as reflecting 'lost certainties' rather than achieving his aim of writing history for his own time.

Like the historian he particularly admired, G M Trevelyan, Bryant thought that the Industrial Revolution had been disastrous. He was deeply nostalgic for an earlier, and, he thought, gentler time. The first chapter, 'Triumphant Island', of volume 3 of his history of Britain, 'Freedom's Own Island', extolled 'this rich, ancient land' where 'a community that had never known invasion and where the new, not confined as on the continent by fortifications, had been free to develop without destroying the old'.⁸¹ However, the next chapter, 'Dark Satanic Mills', described how 'the steam-factory towns' with their 'filth, noise and perpetual inflow of new inhabitants' meant that 'the old framework of society round church, manor-court and the ancient village democracy...broke down completely' leaving only 'the law of the jungle' to operate.⁸² By the end of the 19th century 'the majority of the British people had assumed lives that bore little resemblance to their country forebears', exchanging fresh food, air and proximity to nature for the smoke and fog of the city and its accompanying gin, herd society

⁷⁸ Arthur Bryant *Freedom's Own Island* (Grafton Books 1987) 282; *Set in a Silver Sea*, 139; *Freedom's Own Island*, 55

⁷⁹ *Set in a Silver Sea*, 25

⁸⁰ Julia Stapleton, 'Arthur Bryant as a 20th-century Victorian' *History of European Ideas* vol 30 (2004) 222

⁸¹ *Freedom's Own Island*, 12-13

⁸² *Freedom's Own Island*, 31

and 'the half-penny newspaper'.⁸³ It was to reconnect this society with its traditional roots and values that Bryant wrote his histories. His approach revealed his passionate belief in and wish for social justice, although his work did not discuss the real lives of the ordinary workers as E P Thompson's did.⁸⁴

English exceptionalism

It was not only Bryant who wrote national history extolling Protestantism, the adaptability of the British people and their essential unity. Historians continued to write the history of Britain as change with continuity, with flexibility but firm structures enabling Britain to adapt to challenges that had caused other nations serious problems. Bowle discerned 'one realistic and constant theme: that the undoubted historical success of England, so remarkable in relation to its size, has been a triumph...of a realistic establishment, free from ideological preoccupations, adapting instead of destroying time-honoured institutions...and assimilating new men'.⁸⁵

Rowse also singled out for commendation 'A characteristic of English history... an inner flexibility while retaining useful external forms'.⁸⁶ The development of Parliament, a feature of English history on which older histories concentrated, is also noted by both Rowse and Bryant, themselves older historians (aged at the time of publication 74 and 83 respectively). For Rowse, the creation of representative government was England's most lasting legacy to the world since it had had 'a wide career overseas as a model for young growing nations'.⁸⁷ Bryant declared that 'By finding a constitutional means to reconcile a strong centralised authority with the liberty of the subject and his right to oppose and reform government, she [England] made a contribution of supreme importance to mankind. In the creation of parliament, with its triple components of Crown, Lords and Commons, a land of obstinate men won rights by trial and error that were to become the basis of the laws and institutions by which free men still live.'⁸⁸

Freedom

Several of these histories develop themes treated in earlier works, such as the evolution of Parliament. Freedom was one such theme, although they did not all mean the same thing by the concept. A sense that England was free – free from autocratic rule, linking former colonies

⁸³ *Freedom's Own Island*, 161

⁸⁴ Julia Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 240

⁸⁵ John Bowle, *The English Experience: A Survey of English History from Early to Modern Times* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1971) vii

⁸⁶ Rowse, 178

⁸⁷ Rowse, 27

⁸⁸ Bryant vol 1, 371 (also in *The Medieval Foundation*, 179)

in a free association, the Commonwealth, free from foreign invasion and free although ordered – runs through these histories.

A variation on the theme of freedom was that of England being strong when free of foreign entanglements: from Europe in the case of Johnson, from the USA and Europe in the case of Ridley. Two non-professional historians developed this analysis: Paul Johnson as an anti-EEC journalist, and Jasper Ridley, an historical biographer. Ridley viewed the alliance with the USA as an abandonment of Britain's four-hundred-year-old policy of no foreign entanglements. A permanent alliance with America meant that it became 'in effect impossible for her [Britain] to pursue an independent foreign policy. It was at this moment that Britain ceased to be a great power.'⁸⁹ Links with Europe were not in Britain's interests either, Ridley thought, asserting that 'English power and glory have always flourished most when England was free from Europe and was defying it – in 1559 and 1588, in 1805, in 1940'.⁹⁰ Taking the English heretic Pelagius as his ideal type, Johnson developed an argument about the direction of English history as glorious isolationism. England was only truly herself when alone: separate from Continent and Empire and from international organisations like the UN. Only then was she strong and truly free to develop liberty and social justice. Trade was acceptable; the danger consists in enmeshing our political systems with others. In Johnson's view Pelagius stood for the attitude of intellectual and moral independence that was England's real character.

But, continued Johnson, the English have consistently missed opportunities to reconstruct themselves because they preferred stability and continuity, or, even worse, reform had been won at too great a price, after delays and destruction. Neither the Peasants' Revolt nor the General Strike produced the decisive, determined follow-through that would aim to consolidate gains and push the events to a conclusion. Many significant processes, such as the Reformation and the settlement that ended the Civil War, were muddled compromises, an approach that was typically English. However, Johnson attributed to the English a series of innovations – the Protestant Bible, the scientific, agricultural and, most important, the industrial revolution – that together had led to the modern world.⁹¹ However, all these achievements have been achieved through a particularly English approach:

Everything worthwhile the English have achieved, for themselves and others, has been built upon the great tripod of the liberal ethic: the rejection of violence, the reaching of public decisions through free argument and voluntary compromise, and the slow evolution of moral principles tested by experience and stamped with consensus. All

⁸⁹ Jasper Ridley, *The History of England* (Routledge 1981) 296

⁹⁰ Ridley, 306

⁹¹ Johnson, 393, 240, 140, 268

English history teaches that these are the only methods which, in the end, produce constructive and permanent results.⁹²

Through their methods, as well as through the outcomes, the English had made their great contribution to civilisation.

Bryant's English loved freedom for its own sake. However, it was not an abstract freedom; rather it was the defence of individuals against royal officials.⁹³ 'The English people laid the foundation of an island state which, uniting under a common crown and a reformed religion, carried their love and practice of freedom into every ocean of the world.'⁹⁴ Thus freedom was the basis for the strength of the nation in overseas exploration and expansion. And having defeated Hitler, and not prevented former colonies from gaining independence, England was prepared to grant that precious freedom to others, knowing that this attitude would mean that former possessions would feel goodwill towards England. Thus repetition of England's 'mistakes' over both Ireland and the American colonies would be avoided. Had England been more flexible over the status of these places, both might still now be linked to it. (Churchill had the same fantasy about the United States.)

Periodisation

The character of national history was revealed also in the length of time covered by different historians. Different authors chose different start and finish dates depending on how they viewed national history. The historians studied here, apart from Seaman, began their accounts in the pre-historical period, or at least pre-Roman, although some treat it only briefly. As Clark pointed out, archaeology had made prehistory much more accessible so that it was no longer 'outside the range of historical knowledge' as was thought not so long before.⁹⁵ However, for him this remained 'prehistory'. The real story of England began with the Anglo-Saxons after two false starts: Caesar's expedition and the Roman occupation. Seaman, however, plunged straight into the Anglo-Saxon period, noting only briefly the Roman occupation. His reason may have been his contention that the basic ingredients of England and its history – a strong monarchy, entrenched local institutions and membership of the wider Christian community – were established between the fifth and eleventh centuries. Earlier periods he believed 'are impossible to describe either with accuracy or in detail.'⁹⁶ Nor did Johnson give much attention to prehistory or even to the Romans. He may have wanted to introduce his key figure,

⁹² Johnson, 421-22

⁹³ Bryant, vol 3, 2

⁹⁴ Bryant, vol 2, 21

⁹⁵ Clark, 1

⁹⁶ Seaman, 3

Pelagius, as soon as possible. Rowse was explicit (and rather old-fashioned) in beginning his history with the Romans because he thought that it was at this point that ‘...the island peoples, particularly the Britons, come into the light of day, recorded history’, and Rowse equated Roman culture with civilisation.⁹⁷ For most of these historians, national history owed little or nothing to either the Celts or Romans: the nation emerged chiefly from the Anglo-Saxons who were constructed as England’s true ancestors.

How history was divided into periods depended largely on what aspect of that history was given prominence. Seaman’s solution was to try to avoid the neat packages called ‘periods’. He assigned dates to parts of his narrative that were deliberately designed to break down the artificial barriers which, for example, separated the Tudors from Stuarts, or bracketed them off together. He overlapped the dates of his parts covering the industrial revolution to emphasise continuity of political developments from 1760 to 1860, and ‘to avoid thinking that the Industrial Revolution was the only significant event of the period 1780 to 1830’.⁹⁸ Other historians considered here used largely conventional period distinctions. Division by monarch or reign continued to be popular.

All of these histories were comprehensive. Three took the narrative to the time of writing. Johnson’s history was published in three editions, 1975, 1985, 1992, and each moved the account forward: the first ending in mid-1970 with discussion of the English economy, education system and trade unions; the later editions sketched the domination of the 1980s by Thatcher and Reagan, and John Major’s electoral win in 1992. Ridley thought that rapid change was taking place in the 1970s – decimalisation, new county boundaries and membership of the EEC – which did not have Britain’s interests at heart. Nevertheless, he thought that England would soon attain a ‘national revival’.⁹⁹ Three authors, Seaman, Clark and Bowle, stated that evaluating the present in historical perspective was difficult and for this reason stopped their accounts short of the time of writing. The difficulty was not simply one common to all historians of recent times. Bowle in particular found it hard to create a narrative arc that included all national history up to the time of writing. He regarded the later nineteenth century as the summit of English achievement. He treated the post-1914 period very briefly, arguing that it was impossible to gain perspective on the very recent past. It seemed rather that war, unemployment, poverty, nationalisation and the welfare state did not fit with his

⁹⁷ Rowse, *The Story of Britain*, 8, 9

⁹⁸ Seaman, xxiii

⁹⁹ Ridley, 305-7

political, constitutional and cultural version of England. Indeed he said that 'the loss of Empire, a precarious economy, and disillusionment with the Welfare State have brought in a less hopeful view.'¹⁰⁰ All these authors struggled to fit a continuous narrative of a nation about which they thought there was much to celebrate into an account that linked the successful past with what they perceived as the more difficult present. They believed that the contemporary British nation was globally less significant and economically less successful than it had been earlier.

Models of change

Even historians who deny any theoretical stance hold at least an implicit model of social change. It is not possible to write about change over time without at least describing, if not analysing, the way change happened. Bowle and Rowse agree that people drive change. For Bowle, 'History is ... about people, not abstractions or even things...the chances of personality constantly swayed events.'¹⁰¹ For Rowse it was the personality, particularly of the monarch, that proved decisive, for example, during the Wars of the Roses.¹⁰² For Bryant, individual action was the only way in which development occurs. It was Elizabeth who 'by her dazzling and magnetic personality, and her love for her people, had infected the whole nation with her confidence, sense of purpose and awareness of its unity and destiny', and it was Sir John Moore who drove the reform of the army at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁰³ There was no acknowledgement that the social and economic conditions of the time affect what has been and can be done. A partial exception to this approach was battles. The tactics and main events of the principal conflicts in which Britain was involved were all recounted in some detail; victory over enemies who threaten British freedom or even its existence were key moments in national development. Ridley, as might be expected of a writer who was principally an historical biographer, highlighted the role of individuals: the church/state conflict of the twelfth century was about the clash of two individuals, Henry II and Thomas Becket. This theory of change was of a piece with the characterisation of national history as concerning the deeds of the elite. Other writers paid little attention to social and economic developments, conceiving of historical change as solely political change. Even though these did not omit the Black Death or the Industrial Revolution, for example, they did not connect these to concurrent political or cultural developments.

¹⁰⁰ Bowle, vi

¹⁰¹ Bowle, viii

¹⁰² Rowse, 36

¹⁰³ Bryant vol 2, 91, 472

The role of chance was given weight by some: in history, nothing was inevitable and nothing purely accidental, claimed Johnson.¹⁰⁴ Clark's emphasis on relating what happened but with little sense of the connections between events or their relation to a wider story, was illustrated by his comment: 'It happened that in the seventeen sixties John Wilkes burst into politics.'¹⁰⁵ This was merely to rehearse events without attempting to relate them to an overall narrative and thus create a narrative identity and conception of the nation.

The main theme in all these histories was freedom. This was interpreted to mean freedom from violent revolution when historians rehearsed and extolled ways in which England had achieved beneficial change and in many cases preserved previous structures. This was seen as a peculiarly English achievement. Much of this change was said to have come about through the actions of individuals; these narratives had little place for the social and economic conditions under which individuals made their (constrained) choices. However, fortunate contingencies occurred. These political histories presented more material on social and economic conditions and integrated this material more into the main account than previous histories. Bowle noted that

British historical and social studies are now based on much more elaborate and thorough research. Political history is better related to social and economic themes, to literature and the arts; and with the fading of the political dogmas fashionable in the 1930s, historians are more objectively concerned with what men did and felt rather than interpreting events by retrospective political theory. Hence a salutary realism.¹⁰⁶

However, the English were still sometimes seen as homogeneous and unchanging. For instance, Johnson's English were consistently the same through their history; we are constantly told what English people *are*, including when referring to the past. These approaches marked most of these histories as traditional and hardly succeeding in their aim of writing new histories for their time.

Narrators

Like the authors discussed in chapter 5, this is an Oxford dominated cohort; only one of the seven, Seaman, went to Cambridge. They did not all read history however: G N Clark read

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, 10

¹⁰⁵ Clark, 381

¹⁰⁶ Bowle, 475

classics before taking history; Ridley studied PPE. They were at Oxford over nearly half a century, from G N Clark before the First World War to Paul Johnson who went shortly after the Second World War. All were influenced by wartime, either through serving in the armed forces (Bryant, Clark, Ridley) or by growing up in a nation at war.

Of these seven authors, three were academics: Clark and Rowse were at Oxford whilst Bowle held a professorship in political theory at the University of Bruges. Three were writers earning their living in this way: Ridley wrote on a variety of subjects; Bryant was both a journalist, writing regularly for the *Illustrated London News*, and an independent writer; Paul Johnson was a journalist who used his version of English history to advance his anti-European views. Rowse also wrote extensively after he left All Souls in 1974.¹⁰⁷ Three of the authors (Bryant, Seaman and Bowle) taught in schools for at least part of their career. Teaching history in a school spurred some to write their own histories. Using history as a means of instruction and communication came naturally to them.

Also, these writers were male, white and middle class, with a privileged elite education, and they wrote from that perspective. The social and cultural background of the authors remained similar that of historians in previous periods. The background of Rowse was less privileged, but he achieved admission to Christ Church, Oxford. The history they wrote, even when it was explicitly social and when it expanded the nation to include a wider range of social groups, did not distinguish features that later historians would regard as important: women were overlooked, and race was absent as a category of analysis. Mass immigration from the Commonwealth had only just begun, and the women's movement was just beginning. The awareness of these groupings had scarcely penetrated the world at large. Popular histories of the nation often reflect contemporary concerns some time after they become mainstream in society generally. Only after changes in society are established as of major concern do most historians think it essential to include them in their accounts of the nation. The education, upbringing, and careers of these historians perhaps made them less receptive to change than others were.

¹⁰⁷ A L Rowse in ODNB

Reviews and receptions

David Knowles pointed out in his review of G N Clark's *English History: A Survey* that there were two possible approaches to writing such surveys: either selecting and abbreviating a narrative to give the reader a bird's eye view of the landscape, or presenting and analysing issues and topics with only occasional reference to events and persons.¹⁰⁸ Most works considered in this chapter were summary syntheses.

As might be expected, works by well-known authors attracted more reviews. I have found no reviews of Rowse's book, but it was distributed, unusually, by Marks and Spencer, out of the mainstream of even popular histories, and probably out of the mainstream, too, of Rowse's other publications. John Bowle's history was a rather complacent account of the success of the English, whose continuous adaptation, due to pragmatism combined with stability, enabled them to achieve the industrial revolution and build the Empire. Reviewers commented critically on Bowle's satisfaction with the trajectory of English history. Paul Johnson used his review of Bowle's book as the occasion to write an excoriating attack on the usual self-satisfied view of English history.¹⁰⁹ The *TLS* reviewer thought that Bowle's view of 'the tradition of pragmatism maintained through the centuries within a relatively fluid and adaptable social order' could cynically be called 'muddling through'.¹¹⁰ David Williams however, in *The Times*, chose it as one of his 'Books of the Year' regarding it as 'conspectus-history at its delightful best'.¹¹¹ English history as an angry blast against all those, past and present, who have entangled England with European powers and caused England's current problems is the theme of Paul Johnson's *Offshore Islanders*. It was described by some academic reviewers as 'journalistic history, taking a line', 'very black and white'.¹¹² His viewpoint was elitist, socialist, Catholic, intellectual, nationalist, but for some the ideas behind it came from an original mind and had a big theme that would stir up many, providing an answer for those who wondered how present difficulties had arisen.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ David Knowles, *Spectator*, 29 May 1971, 755

¹⁰⁹ Paul Johnson, 'Downhill All the Way', *New Statesman* 24 September 1971, 398

¹¹⁰ *Times Literary Supplement* 22 October 1971, 1313; the reviewer is now known to be Maurice Ashley

¹¹¹ David Williams, Books of the Year, *The Times* 9 December 1971, 12

¹¹² John Vincent, *Spectator* 9 September 1972, x; *Times Literary Supplement* 15 September 1972, 1052; the anonymous reviewer was CM Woodhouse

¹¹³ Woodhouse in *Times Literary Supplement*; John Vaizey, 'Tell England' *New Statesman* 8 September 1972, 324

Because he was so well known, Clark's book attracted many reviews from fellow historians. Several praised it as an excellent example of 'the long scholarly treatment of English history within a single pair of covers'. M R D Foot thought it excellent, rendering Trevelyan obsolete because it was more up-to-date; the anonymous reviewer in *Kleio* also described it as 'excellent' and preferable to R J White's history.¹¹⁴ Although Clark did not specify his expected readership, several reviewers thought the *Survey* would be suitable both for students and general readers as the OUP had hoped in commissioning it. Criticism focused on the predominance of political history, and on Clark's use of the concept of 'community'. Lewin deduced that Clark was 'more concerned about wars and the fate of kings than about bread, butter and who got cake as well'.¹¹⁵ Donald Read in the *English Historical Review* concluded that 'He expects a "governing class" still to govern, and though he may have set out to describe social inter-relationships, what he has actually written dwells too much upon that class and its politics.'¹¹⁶ The most frequent criticism of the book concerned the concept of community. Read found Clark unclear how or whether local communities contributed to the sense of national community, and whether the sense of national community arose in the medieval period or was a much later development. Consequently, the chronological political narrative was not sufficiently connected to an overall argument.¹¹⁷ Asa Briggs also felt that Clark had not fully explored the 'changing meanings in different contexts' of the concept of community. He considered the last chapters on C20 'wholly inadequate' (as Octopus thought too when they came to reissue it, see above) and the book to have no vantage point or perspective. Most tellingly, Briggs commented that 'it fails to deal with the kinds of questions about past, present and future which many general readers will be asking in the 1970s'.¹¹⁸

Ridley's account, which lamented the decline of England since its triumph at Trafalgar and Waterloo, and its achievement in the Industrial Revolution, was described in *History Today* as 'certainly not *the* history of England', nor will it be consulted as often as Morton, Trevelyan, Feiling or G N Clark, although it will stand beside these.¹¹⁹ The same reviewer also commented on Seaman's work, rating it, along with Ridley's, slightly better than those surveys that sink without trace, and having a degree of 'verve' to make an appeal wider than to students alone. He included many aspects of national life, the reviewer noted: his nation was not just that of politicians, monarchs and soldiers. Hence 'he adds a dimension to the past which is frequently

¹¹⁴ M R D Foot: in *Irish Press* 3 July 1971; *Kleio: a Journal of Historical Studies from Africa* October 1971

¹¹⁵ Julius Lewin, *Freethinker* 12 June 1971 (Lewin was a South African academic who had worked also in Britain)

¹¹⁶ Donald Read, *EHR* vol 87 no 344 (July 1972) 575

¹¹⁷ Read, *EHR* 575

¹¹⁸ Asa Briggs, 'Seventy Generations' *Guardian* 20 May 1971

¹¹⁹ Ivan Roots, *History Today* 'Packaging England' January 1982, 55

missing' from purely political histories.¹²⁰ Seaman's history was comprehensive in its coverage of topics as well as in time.

Stapleton noted that Bryant's work was patronised by some, such as Woodrow Wyatt in *The Times*, who commented that the first volume was 'a pleasurable way of absorbing history painlessly' and would make good television.¹²¹ This sentiment was echoed by Ronald Hutton reviewing the first volume, describing it as 'a readable, stylised pageant'. However Hutton went on to attack Bryant for writing not history but myth, and damaging and inaccurate myth, arguing that, if professional historians did not write for the public, those who wrote misleading, but popular, history would fill the gap.¹²² The provincial press especially liked the first volume as it had 'no debunking'. *The Illustrated London News* (for which Bryant had for many years been a columnist) of course liked it, defending his emphasis on Christianity and the Church.¹²³ One or two reviewers, such as Bruce Lenman, understood, even if they did not agree with, Bryant's critical stance towards contemporary society.¹²⁴ Lenman wrote that, although on the surface it was a celebration of the glories of the Island Race, at a deeper level it showed Bryant's anxiety about the present state of the nation. The high sales at least of volume 1 (no 2 on the best-seller lists and earning Bryant £18,000 in the first six months of publication) demonstrated the continuing appeal of his romantic, patriotic history even in the 1980s.¹²⁵

Conclusion

The solution of some historians to the difficulties of writing national history in the 1970s and 1980s seemed to be 'business as usual'. Towards the end of their lives, Bowle, Rowse and Bryant produced narratives that continued to construct the nation as the political elite whose past assured them of a (mostly) secure present, if not of a glorious future. Bryant's effusive romantic patriotism was less attractive to those who wanted a more robust appraisal of the nation's past. He appealed increasingly to those of the older generation who shared his memories and ideals.¹²⁶ These authors concentrated on the affairs of England, implying that

¹²⁰ Marc L Schwarz, *The History Teacher* vol 16 no 2 (February 1983) 273

¹²¹ *The Times* 1 March 1984, 15

¹²² Ronald Hutton 'The Other Arthurian Legend' review of Bryant vol 1 in *History Today* October 1984, 60-61

¹²³ Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant*, 280

¹²⁴ Bruce P Lenman, 'Forever England?' review of Bryant vol 2 in *History Today* September 1986, 52-3

¹²⁵ Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant*, 281

¹²⁶ Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant*, 285

Scotland and Wales, never mind Ireland, were not part of the history of the United Kingdom. Workers feature only marginally. These were geographically and socially limited accounts, narratives that in some cases did not extend to the time of writing, their authors finding it too difficult not only to understand the approach of contemporary history but also to write about a diminished nation. Nevertheless, a sense emerged that they were writing traditional history as a protection against change, indeed change for the worse, in the nation. Bryant had a vision of an England united first in pursuing an enemy and later in a sense of national identity, social justice, security of work, and housing. His readers eagerly consumed accounts that encouraged a fragile sense of patriotic community along with doubts about how far it still existed.¹²⁷

It was left to a Welsh historian, Kenneth Morgan, writing a history of Britain rather than of England, to write in 1984 about the twentieth century in terms that legitimated later events, finding much to be proud of in the present. He found much continuity: the devotion to place, the individuality of British people, neighbourliness and a sense of history embodied in the monarchy and parliament. He argued that although earlier periods had experienced 'greater pomp, power and prosperity...the values of being British could still be affirmed and sustained'.¹²⁸ Old approaches to history were not dead, but rather moribund. Fresh approaches would rescue the national narrative and make it, at least in some hands, responsive to contemporary concerns about the nature of British society.

¹²⁷ Reba Soffer, *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America: the Great War to Thatcher and Reagan* (OUP 2009) 129

¹²⁸ Kenneth O Morgan, 'The Twentieth Century' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain*, ed Kenneth O Morgan, (OUP 1984) 591

CHAPTER 7 FOCUS ON SOCIAL HISTORY c1970-c1990

- 1972 Somerset Fry, Plantagenet, *2000 years of British life: a social history of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland*, Collins, Glasgow
- 1974 Marghanita Laski, *Kipling's English History* BBC Publications
- 1975 Theo Barker, *The Long March of Everyman* Andre Deutsch/Penguin
- 1982 Maurice Ashley, *The People of England: A Social and Economic History* Weidenfeld and Nicolson
- 1983 Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England* Weidenfeld and Nicolson
- 1984 J F C Harrison *The Common People: A History from the Norman Conquest to the Present*, Fontana
- 1987 Christopher Hibbert *The English: a Social History 1066-1945* HarperCollinsPublishers

The nature and origins of social history

In the third chapter of his *History of England from the Accession of James II*, Macaulay looked at the state of the nation in 1685. He discussed population, national income, the military, agriculture, minerals, country gentlemen, the growth of towns and the state of London, courts and coffee houses, travel, education and newspapers, literature and the arts, science and the Royal Society. He called it a 'description'. He did not try to account for changes in these aspects of national life, and he did not think there was anything of interest to say about 'the great body of the people, of those who held the ploughs, of those who tended the oxen, who toiled at the looms of Norwich and squared the Portland stone for Saint Paul's. Nor can very much be said. The most numerous class is precisely the class respecting which we have the most meagre information. In those times philanthropists did not yet regard it as a sacred duty, nor had demagogues found it a lucrative trade, to expiate on the distress of the labourer. History was too much occupied with courts and camps to spare a line for the hut of the peasant or the garret of the mechanic.'

Although in 1849 Macaulay found historians preoccupied with politics and war, British historians have in practice often written social history. From Macaulay himself and J R Green to Tawney, Trevelyan and E P Thompson and onwards, historians have portrayed and discussed structure and changes in society. However, the social was often relegated, along with economic and cultural history, to separate chapters, as if the nation consisted of different sections whose inhabitants and activities never overlapped.

Whilst it was not until the 1970s that the history of the nation was produced with the focus mainly on social history, historical work in both France and England in the 1920s and 1930s,

although described as economic history, was also concerned with social history topics. In France, the Annalists aimed to produce history that integrated all aspects of historical change and analysis into one coherent whole. In England, historians such as Eileen Power and R H Tawney wrote social as well as economic history. Trevelyan's *English Social History* however, focused on England's rural heritage and the high culture of art and literature (see chapter 4), and Mitchell and Leys' *A History of the English People*, on the history of everyday life, again concentrating on the countryside (see chapter 5). As Briggs noted, social history had often in the past been thought of as more trivial than the history of politics, military conflict or the standard of living.¹ The Hammonds and the Webbs in the pre Second World War period, and G D H Cole and Asa Briggs post-war, together with the members of the Communist Party History Group, were all historians who used history as a means of understanding contemporary society and contributing ideas for constructive change. Marxism as a theory to explain change, and the study of class as the structural feature of society, were particularly important in the early 1960s, with E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963, the seminal text.² However, non-Marxist historians were influential too, such as G M Young and George Kitson Clark in their work on Victorian England, and Harold Perkin in his *The Origins Of Modern English Society, 1780-1880*, published in 1969, in which he challenged the Marxist view.³

The principal focus of social history from the mid 1960s was class. Social history had developed in Britain to complement political history, as Trevelyan's *English Social History* made clear. He envisaged that work as a companion to his *History of England*. He did not try to write a history that combined both approaches as later historians, such as Perkins and Briggs, did. Society was seen as hierarchically structured. Study moved away from the labouring poor to an examination of class relations and class struggle inspired by left-sympathising historians who saw an analysis of the past conflicts between classes as a means to political action and transformation in the present.⁴ Lawrence Stone's *Crisis of the Aristocracy* (1965) complemented E P Thompson's study of working class development. These two works were particularly significant, covering both the working class and the aristocracy, but not much on the middle class and so provided only a partial history of society.

¹ Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England* (Penguin books 2nd ed 1987) ix

² Roderick Floud and Pat Thane 'Sociology and History: Partnership, Rivalry, or Mutual Incomprehension?' in *British Sociology Seen from Without and Within* ed A H Halsey and W G Runciman, (OUP for British Academy, British Academy Occasional Paper 6 2005) 57-68

³ Miles Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?' *History Workshop Journal* no 43 (Spring 1997) p 156-57; Floud and Thane, 61

⁴ Stefan Berger, 'The rise and fall of critical historiography', *European Review of History* vol 3 issue 2 (Autumn 1996); Floud and Thane, 59

The rise of sociology as an independent discipline, and technological change allowing large-scale numerical analysis by computer, came together to change the type of enquiry undertaken by some historians. Anthropology, too, influenced some historians' approaches. Influenced by a 1961 lecture by Evans Pritchard, which had argued for the similarity of anthropology and history, Keith Thomas published in 1963 an article on history and anthropology.⁵ In this, he began to question the specialisation within the historical profession and to wonder whether historians could not use other disciplines – particularly anthropology – to enrich their understanding. Through his hugely influential work, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, he helped to open the study of medieval and early modern rituals and practices in terms of their meanings for the practitioners, rather than focusing on the intellectual content of their beliefs, much as anthropologists might explore another culture. The social significance of these beliefs became the subject of study. Many historians became aware that actions and beliefs arose from ideas and ideologies in the surrounding culture, as well as from economic and social conditions. Historians became more interested in causes and analysis than in narrative, foregrounding the study of society, often with an eye to changing it.⁶ The *Times Literary Supplement* carried in 1966 a series of articles on the state of historical practice that also urged history to use methods and materials from the social sciences to enrich understanding of the past.

Thus the 1960s saw an expansion in the practice and the subject matter of social history and new methods for studying it. The mood of the 1960s fostered this move, encouraging historians, such as A J P Taylor with his revisionist interpretation of the origins of the Second World War, to challenge influential paradigms as the young did in other areas.⁷ The rise of the women's movement made women as a group more aware that conventional history usually left their experiences out of account. Even E P Thompson's working class was almost all male. As Obelkevich noted, dissatisfaction with the old is always a necessary precursor to the emergence of new sorts of history.⁸

In 1970, Hobsbawm published an influential article, 'From Social History to the History of Society'. This argued for a move away from history of individual or discrete social phenomena to history of societies as integrated wholes, laying out a programme of future work that moved

⁵ Keith Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', *Past and Present* no 24 (April 1963)

⁶ David Cannadine, 'Preface' *What is History Now?* (Palgrave Macmillan 2002) viii

⁷ Floud and Thane, 60; Michael Bentley, *Companion to British Historiography*, 488

⁸ Jim Obelkevich, 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', *Contemporary British History* vol 14 no 4 (Winter 2000) 126

away from great men and ideas and focused instead on demography, social groups, mentalities and social change.⁹ Social history developed from being concerned only with the 'social', excluding politics and the exercise of power, to being concerned with the whole of society in all its aspects. Some historians began to suppose that only a society-centred history could combine intellectual rigour with imaginative interpretation, and was the only way to arrive at comprehensive history.¹⁰ Also significant in expanding social history methods and subject matter was *The World We Have Lost* by Peter Laslett, first published in 1965. This, as the original introduction made clear, was intended to sketch a complete social structure, including families and communities of England, over a long time period, from before the Industrial Revolution. Using statistical methods he tackled wider historical questions as well as specific queries. Laslett was keen to bring the results of this research, in which he was assisted by amateurs investigating parish records, to ordinary people and not to work solely within academia.¹¹

Some historians had already written comprehensive history that took in many aspects of the topic being considered. Cole and Postgate's *The Common People 1746-1938* 'was intended to cover the history of the common people in its political and economic aspects'.¹² Asa Briggs wrote in this way on Victorian topics and went on to use this approach in his *Social History of England*. However, as late as 1971, John Bowle could write of 'the vast majority of peasants, of whom we can never directly know much, [who] led rustic and illiterate lives which no amount of modern statistical method or computer techniques are likely to illuminate'.¹³

As the 1970s proceeded, there was a change in the orientation of social historians' attention, away from class as the main if not the sole category of analysis and towards women's history and gender history. The idea that class, socio-economic position, explained everything about the behaviour of groups and the way they changed, fell prey to doubts. Many historians began to realise that it was not only people's social and economic situation that provided understanding of their overall situation and actions.¹⁴ Gender, relations between the sexes, the different roles of men and women in history became the object of attention, along with

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'From Social History to the History of Society' reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm *On History* (Abacus 2005)

¹⁰ Richard Evans, *In Defence of History* (Granta Books 1997) 182

¹¹ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost*, (Routledge Abingdon 2000) Introduction to the first edition, xix

University of Cambridge 'Take a Journey into History'

<http://www.historycambridge.com/default.asp?contentID=759> [accessed 10 June 2012]

¹² G D H Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People 1746-1938* (Methuen 1938) xi

¹³ John Bowle, *The English Experience* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1971) 111

¹⁴ Floud and Thane, 66-67

other sources of identity such as race and ethnicity.¹⁵ Sheila Rowbotham produced *Hidden From History* in 1975. In this book she told stories of radical, working class women whose lives had hitherto been obscure. As she noted, her work came from women's political groups rather than from academic history (p ix) and she hoped it would encourage further work, as indeed it did.¹⁶ One of the reasons that social history became more important and more widespread was the wish of certain groups that had felt marginalised by the usual national story to correct that omission, and to be included as they were becoming more assertive in the wider society. The rise of social history did not itself lead to a recasting of the liberal national narrative but rather to attempts to revise it to include more social groups.¹⁷ The profession, as ever, responded by founding new societies and new journals. Following the establishment of *Past and Present* in 1952, the *Society for the Study of Labour History* was founded under Asa Briggs, followed in 1973 by the journal *Social History* and in 1976 by the Social History Society and the journal *History Workshop*. These periodicals provided forums where new approaches and ideas could be discussed. History at this time tended to deal with groups, with collective identities that were sometimes seen as acting like individuals.¹⁸

The major issues of society and politics that seemed significant in the 1960s and 1970s appeared to become less important in the 1980s: social class appeared to diminish in significance as manual work declined and service work grew. Margaret Thatcher reduced the power of trade unions, and weakened local democracy and the welfare state; the Labour Party was in disarray and the Communist Party of Great Britain collapsed and was wound up in 1991. The left-wing notion of using social history as a guide to political action in the present was hard to sustain.¹⁹ Some social historians themselves had begun to criticise the direction of social history. Lawrence Stone's 'Return to Narrative' reported that 'More and more of the "new historians" are now trying to discover what was going on inside people's heads in the past, and what it was like to live in the past, questions which inevitably lead back to the use of narrative.' He noted a shift of interest towards cultural and emotional aspects of the past, to individuals and the light that anthropology and psychology could throw on them, interconnected reasons for change and a more literary approach, all of which historians took up and developed in the

¹⁵ Donald Meyer, review of *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the State of Historical Study* by G R Elton, *History and Theory* vol 32 no 3 (October 1993) 336

¹⁶ Jill Liddington, 'History, Feminism and Gender Studies' working paper 1 University of Leeds Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies <http://www.jliddington.org.uk/cig1.html>

¹⁷ Donald Meyer, review in *History and Theory* vol 32 no 3 (October 1993) 338

¹⁸ Thomas Welskopp, 'Social History', in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, ed Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (Hodder Arnold 2003) 215

¹⁹ Hartmut Kaelble, 'Social History in Europe', *Journal of Social History* vol 37 no 1 Special Issue (Autumn 2003) p 32; Berger, 'The rise and fall of critical historiography'

1980s.²⁰ This move encouraged attention to such themes as memory, and contributed to a sense that conventional social history was not able to deliver the inclusive, new, almost definitive, approach that had been hoped for.²¹ *History Workshop* provided a forum for much discussion of new developments. The editorial for the spring 1983 issue was headed 'Culture and Gender: the Separate Worlds of Men and Women' and reflected on two articles on nineteenth century social history. The editorial ended with a note drawing attention to an article in the journal on Martin Luther King, commenting that black politics was a theme *History Workshop* had sorely neglected to that point, and that the category of the nation could be widened by including race and ethnicity.²²

What has come to be known as cultural history began to challenge social history. Miri Rubin defined culture as 'the domain of representation, the struggle over meaning... disseminated powerfully through the constitutive language practices, rituals and representations'. As this approach grew in popularity from the 1980s onwards, it became associated with the 'linguistic turn', as its interest in contested meanings inevitably required an interest in the language in which these are expressed.²³ The methodology of some historical practice also changed. Attention was increasingly given to history as text, as one story among many possible stories. By the 1980s, the hopes of the previous decades were beginning to founder. Both intellectually and politically, conservatism was becoming influential; social history had not delivered everything hoped for; serious problems with the British economy led politicians to develop more right wing approaches intended to reduce trade union power and control inflation, and commentators were beginning to ask if Britain were governable. Some national histories were being produced that take as their focus ordinary people rather than governments and wars. The topics urged by Hobsbawm had been greatly expanded and varied to include many different topics and aspects of life in the past.²⁴ By the end of the 1980s, social history had found its place in the historical community; it was part of the mainstream of historical study.

²⁰ Lawrence Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History', *Past and Present* no. 85 (Nov 1979) 13; 23-24

²¹ Berger, 'The rise and fall of critical historiography'

²² Editorial, *History Workshop*, no 15 (Spring 1983) 3

²³ Miri Rubin, *Cultural History* http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/themes/cultural_history.html

²⁴ Kaelble, 29-31

National history as social history

The distinctions between political, economic and social history are arbitrary. Most social histories include material on economic aspects and references to and comments on political events, and many political histories provide a social and economic context for events. Briggs thought it was impossible for social historians to leave out politics, as he claimed Trevelyan tried to do.²⁵ Even those works which are largely histories of everyday things use period names to describe artistic styles, for instance referring to a house as Queen Anne style, and the nineteenth century as Victorian, as Fry and Ashley do. However, the histories of England/Britain considered here explicitly foreground the social. Some are primarily concerned with life-style, getting a living, family, leisure; some describe the structure of society, usually in class terms, and one or two make efforts to analyse the processes of change within various aspects of society.

Writing in 1970, Hobsbawm identified three sorts of social history which were dominant before the time he was writing: the history of the lower classes and their social movements (for example the Hammonds' trilogy on labourers²⁶), work on 'manners, customs, everyday life' (of the sort written by Mitchell and Leys²⁷) and the combination of social and economic history (such as Clapham's *Economic History of Modern Britain* published between 1926 and 1938). Hobsbawm disparagingly gave Trevelyan's *English Social History* as an example of the history of everyday things, suggesting (inaccurately) that Trevelyan had described social history as 'history with the politics left out'. In fact Trevelyan stated that while 'social history might be defined negatively' in that way, it was 'difficult to leave out the politics from the history of any people, particularly the English people'. Trevelyan's actual definition had much more in common with the ways in which Briggs, Harrison and Hobsbawm described social history. It did describe 'the daily life of the inhabitants of the land in past ages'. But for Trevelyan, this description 'includes the human as well as the economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and household life, the conditions of labour and leisure, the attitude of man to nature, the culture of each age as it arose out of these general conditions of life, and took ever changing forms in religion, literature and music, architecture, learning and thought'.²⁸ While this stresses what he calls 'the human', the definition presupposes an initial account of the economic relation of classes.

²⁵ Briggs, 9

²⁶ J L and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (1911), *The Town Labourer* (1917) and *The Skilled Labourer* (1919)

²⁷ R D Mitchell and M D R Leys, *A history of the English people* (Longmans 1950)

²⁸ G M Trevelyan, *English Social History* (Longmans 2nd ed 1946) vii-viii

New social histories

Of the seven authors whose works are the subject of this chapter, three (Barker, Briggs and Harrison) follow the prescriptions of the new social history. Their assumptions, methods and topics were those of the new persuasion. In the course of their social histories, Hobsbawm, Briggs and Harrison all commented on how social history should be written. They had some assumptions in common. In line with Hobsbawm's views, Briggs and Harrison made 'the material and historical environment, demography, forces and techniques of production, the structure of the consequent economy, divisions of labour and social relations arising from these' the basis for their accounts of social history.²⁹ Fundamental to writing social history were geography, population and the economic basis of society. These drove the creation of social groups (classes) and their interaction with each other. This made work central – what work was done, organised and paid for.

Briggs approached social history as the all-inclusive history of society, concerned with both structures and processes of change. It needed to relate to human subsistence in the geography of place and economic and demographic history, but must also include culture (arts, crafts, folklore, religion) as well as comprehensive political coverage. Lastly, it must deal not only with particular groups (classes) but also with how those groups related to each other. Following this prescription in *A Social History of England* led him to focus on experience rather than concepts and to pay attention to language, literature, art, music and social sciences (because these are experiential).³⁰ Harrison, by contrast, focused solely on 'the common people' (whom he did not define). Most history, he claimed, left out common people (70-90% of population) and was concerned with those who exercise power and control wealth. While the history of the common people should not be submerged in general history, they are clearly related: 'The common people were always faced with the problem of living in a world they did not create.'³¹ One reason to write a history of 'the common people' was that 'In our day, when the emphasis is on grass-roots democracy and cultural pluralism, and elites are regarded with suspicion, there is a natural desire to know more about the people at the bottom of the social heap.' Nevertheless, it is these who experience the true values of a society.³² His criteria for structuring his book were those features that were important to his central group, the ordinary people. He noted that 'The basis of selection will be the degree to which events and

²⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'From Social History to the History of Society' (1970) in *On History* (Abacus 2005) p 108

³⁰ Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England* (2nd ed Penguin 1987) ix-x

³¹ Harrison, 14

³² J F C Harrison, *The Common People: A History from the Norman Conquest to the Present* (Fontana 1984) 13

experiences illuminate the lives of ordinary men and women and their perceptions of themselves and their world.' These would probably be work, family, popular mentalities and popular forms of organisation.³³ The authors of the radio series and later book *The Long March of Everyman* also aimed to include the political and the social; they too focused mainly on ordinary people rather than elites.

Several historians at this time, including Briggs, Harrison and Barker, argued that the aim of a contemporary national history is to help us understand where we are now and to find a way towards a better future. Contemporary social concerns – the end of full employment and confidence in continuing economic growth, worsening industrial relations, race conflicts, Celtic nationalism – encouraged interest in the historical development of society. Briggs put it effectively in his introduction to the information brochure for *The Long March of Everyman*:

The time is right in our own shifting present to explore our past afresh. The changes of the last twenty-five years have made us aware of new freedoms and new oppressions, of the juxtaposition of new and old forms of power. Can we in the light of our own situation find lost meanings in the past, ties across the centuries? We are what we are not just because of our recent history, but because of old and often buried layers of experience.³⁴

History, and particularly social history, extends our sympathies by extending our range of knowledge, argue Ashley, Briggs and Harrison.³⁵ Briggs says that 'sometimes it is through a distant mirror that we can most clearly see significant features of our own society and culture'; Ashley notes that as well as satisfying the desire of people to escape into another world not our own, social history helps us to analyse our own society and recognise how it has evolved. Barker, who edited the book version of *The Long March of Everyman*, and Michael Mason, the series producer, presented their history in order to answer the question, 'What was life like for our ancestors?'³⁶

For Harrison the way that history can help us 'widen our experience of men and society' is its most significant aspect. In addition, he wanted to write a radical history for those whose past is left out of the history books.³⁷ Problems relating to historical education are the reason behind some books: *The Long March of Everyman* and Briggs' identify deficiencies in school

³³ Harrison, 14-15

³⁴ Asa Briggs, introductory booklet to *The Long March of Everyman* programmes (BBC 1971) 5

³⁵ Ashley, 209; Briggs, x; Harrison, 13

³⁶ Ed Theo Barker, *The Long March of Everyman* (Penguin 1978) back cover

³⁷ J F C Harrison, telephone interview 6 December 2011

history – it was too fragmented, covered too little, focused too much on skills – that they believed an overview could help remedy.³⁸

The Long March of Everyman

Although the focus of this study is confined to single author works that usually cover the whole span of English/British history, I have made an exception for *The Long March of Everyman*. It is a notable example of a work of social history treating the whole time span of national history. The techniques of recording voices contributed significantly to the development of oral history that was to be important in the later growth of social history. It dealt mainly with the working class but did not ignore the elite, and by describing the origins of features of contemporary society, such as industrialisation, Empire and war, concentrated on themes of concern to people in the 1970s.

The Long March of Everyman began as a series of 26 radio programmes, each lasting 45 minutes, broadcast weekly from 21 November 1971 to 24 May 1972 on Sunday evenings, repeated on Wednesday afternoons. They were re-broadcast between 30 September 1972 and 24 March 1973. For the second repeat, an additional ten minutes of introductions and epilogues were added.³⁹ Radio programming possibilities had been transformed by the development of tape recording that enabled programme makers to record audio pieces at different times and places and use them in subsequent programmes.

The programme announcement described the series as 'Themes and variations from the history of Britain'.⁴⁰ The programmes covered the period 'From the men of prehistory' to 'the fifties and sixties [which] seemed to see everything in flux'.⁴¹ An historian with expertise in the appropriate period directed each programme, with Theo Barker and Asa Briggs each taking two programmes. About two thirds of the programmes were devoted to the eighteenth century onwards, a division that Michael Mason thought appropriate because the 'material works out this way anyhow and this corresponds to common interest'.⁴² The BBC considered that the series 'had been a major radio achievement which had enjoyed considerable audience reaction success', achieving about 550,000 listeners each week.⁴³ Ian Trethowan, then

³⁸ Barker, *The Long March of Everyman*, 7; Briggs, x

³⁹ Barker, *The Long March of Everyman*, 296

⁴⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/classical/40thanniversary/comments.shtml>

⁴¹ BBC Programme Schedule booklet describing series

⁴² BBC Written Archives (WAC R51/1,171/1 9 March 1970)

⁴³ BBC Report to the Programme Review Board (WAC R 137/126/1)

Managing Director of BBC Radio, called *The Long March of Everyman* 'probably the most ambitious historical project which radio has ever conceived'.⁴⁴

In a substantial paper setting out his rationale and ideas, Michael Mason proposed that 'We take the history of the British people "who never have spoken yet" and present that, in full scholarly integrity, as great popular epic of everyday life.' He thought that such a history was needed, as history's purpose is to speak to our situation. At present, he believed, the British were anxious because they felt rootless. This series 'could therefore go to meet a deep, if often unformulated need'. To do this, the series needed to emphasise the British people, not the political history. The current sense of disempowerment could be countered by a history showing their past as 'something not happening-to but made-by'. He realised that this approach would have a 'radical bias' since it presupposed that the people were as worthy of study as the powerful elite. He imagined the series as 'the grand debate between many and few, subjection and power, dynamic and static, conservative and radical...the people itself, by whom we understand the bourgeois, the sea-captain or shopkeeper and so on, as well as the worker, the factory hand or peasant or private soldier and the like.' He was clear that no single historian could present it on their own because 'history not now written that way [sic]'.⁴⁵

The topics he envisaged ranged widely among 'the great commonplaces that are the Leitmotiven[sic] of most people's lives'. These included 'prices and wages, working conditions', together with 'Fashions and clothing' and 'Enjoyment – drinking, dancing, gaming etc'. The more difficult side of life would be covered in such topics as 'Attitude to THEM – government, boss, vicar etc etc; Weathering disasters – war, unemployment etc'. A further list read: 'Ethnic mix, Dirt and cleanliness, the Language, Poverty, Patriotism/Jingoism/Internationalism, Religion/Superstition, Housing, Recreation/Art, Them – elites seen by people/people seen by elites/geographical "strangers", Wealth, Dreams, Visions and nightmares, Political consciousness, the sea, Communication, Health and Disease, Tempo of Life, Individual and group, Bandits and Outsiders, Women.'⁴⁶ These topics and themes reflect the way Hobsbawm and Briggs thought social history should be written, making the conditions of work, wages and prices central, and suggesting that it was appropriate to include many aspects of the nation's cultural, social, economic and political life in one history. The publicity booklet that accompanied the series stated that it:

⁴⁴ Publicity booklet for *The Long March of Everyman*, BBC Publications 1971

⁴⁵ BBC Written Archives (WAC R51/1,171/1 9 March 1970)

⁴⁶ BBC Written Archives (WAC R51/1,171/1 9 March 1970)

... will re-present for listeners (and help them to re-create in the theatre of their own imagination) a sense of what it has been like to be an ordinary citizen of this island during the last 2000 years... by using as far as possible the actual words of the common man of the past re-spoken for him by the common man of today...to convey how it really felt and smelt, the texture of the daily experience of the past, as well as the range of ideas and events.⁴⁷

The BBC made ambitious plans for follow-up books and LPs:

‘Unprecedented efforts are going to be made by the BBC itself to promote and publicise the series. One remarkable aspect of the regard in which the project is held is a twofold breakthrough, on an unprecedented scale, in subsidiary exploitation. Agreement has been reached in principle by the BBC for the following:

An issue of the entire series on 26 LPs by the record company Argo

A publication based on the series, in two or three large illustrated volumes, in hardback and paperback, by Andre [sic] Deutsch and Penguin Books

The publication will not be simply a reprinting of the scripts, but an analogue in terms of print and picture of the kind of collage and comment produced aurally by the broadcasts.’⁴⁸

Piers Burnett from André Deutsch invited in turn several historians – Gwyn Williams, Christopher Hill, Maurice Keen – who had been involved with the project to act as editor of the book, but without success. Finally Michael Mason’s original suggestion of Theo Barker was taken up and Barker agreed, starting work early in 1972.⁴⁹ It was decided to begin with a volume covering the period from the Industrial Revolution, both because more recent history was expected to be more popular, and because it would be more in people’s minds having been covered in the later programmes.⁵⁰ Barker was able to arrange for all the contributions to be completed by the end of that year. In their bold publicity proposals for publication, André Deutsch and Penguin imagined that

...the mere fact of such a distinguished gallery of historians coming together on a single project is of great potential benefit from the promotional point of view, and certainly some publicity can be derived from this. We would envisage a major promotional effort in support of the hardback edition, with heavy pre-publication advertising in the trade press...and advertising in the national press following publication day. It seems likely that both TV and press will give wide coverage to what will, after all, be a novel, ambitious and original venture....some form of reception on publication day, possibly even coupled with a press conference, might be considered.

⁴⁷ Ian Trethowan, introduction to publicity booklet to accompany *The Long March of Everyman* programmes, (BBC 1971) 4

⁴⁸ BBC Newsletter no 8 ‘A HISTORY OF THE BRITISH PEOPLE, n/d, André Deutsch archive box 17 McFarlin Library Special Collections University of Tulsa Oklahoma USA

⁴⁹ André Deutsch archive

⁵⁰ BBC Written Archive file R51/1,171/1 *The Long March of Everyman*; André Deutsch archive

They also thought that 'there is a very distinct possibility of arranging for separate American publication'.⁵¹

Barker stressed that the book, like the programmes, was only 'themes and variations', 'not an attempt at a comprehensive portrait'.⁵² While much of the text was taken from the radio programmes, both the contemporary quotations and the comments on them were given at greater length. The biggest challenge, Barker believed, was that of converting the 'total audio' of the programmes to text only, a challenge which critics of the subsequent book doubted he had met successfully.⁵³ The final book was heavily weighted towards the history of the working class; the effects of major changes on the everyday lives of ordinary working people form the bulk of the text. The earlier intention to include all sections of society was not fully carried out, showing how difficult it was to write 'total' history.

The publishing programme became very delayed. Piers Burnett of André Deutsch noted in September 1974 that the printing industry was in a state of unprecedented confusion (possibly due in part to there being two elections that year which created a great deal of work in printing party manifestos).⁵⁴ The hardback edition eventually appeared in 1975; the Penguin version not until 1978. Thereafter the publicity plans foundered. The exciting proposals to issue the programmes as commercial gramophone records and as lavishly illustrated books came to nothing, but neither the BBC nor the André Deutsch Archives have any material on the reason for this failure. Even as a paperback only one volume was produced; the earlier volume never appeared. Michael Mason, producer of the programmes, believes the reason was that the book was 'a flop and so Penguin decided to forget about vol 1!'⁵⁵ It seems that this radical approach to English social history really only worked in the audio format, as reviews often commented, although if so, it is still a puzzle why the gramophone records were not produced.

Barker himself thought that the series and the book had made a significant historiographical contribution. The original programme directors wrote the chapters of the book version, for which '...the participating historians were made to think afresh about their sources, their research methods and the whole art of presenting radio history to non-specialists. In this way BBC Radio may be said to have made a contribution to learning which was of some

⁵¹ THE LONG MARCH OF EVERYMAN: Proposals for publication in book form by André Deutsch Ltd and Penguin Books (n/d) André Deutsch archive

⁵² Barker, 9

⁵³ Barker, 7

⁵⁴ Piers Burnett to Theo Barker 13 September 1974

⁵⁵ Personal communication from Michael Mason, 5 October 2007

historiographical and educational importance.⁵⁶ Theo Barker considered that the series 'succeeded in bringing British history to life for many people who had not previously been particularly interested in the past'.⁵⁷ As such its reach was significant. F M L Thompson, in his obituary of Theo Barker, suggests that *The Long March of Everyman*, 'a skilful blend of documentary material and oral testimonies', was influential in the formation of the Oral History Society in 1973, but the early numbers of its journal do not mention the radio series.⁵⁸

Marghanita Laski, *Kipling's English History*

Somewhat in the same genre was Marghanita Laski's *Kipling's English History*. This work contained the text of five radio programmes 'presenting some aspects of English history as seen by Kipling in his verse'.⁵⁹ She thought that listeners would enjoy English history as 'straightforward story-telling made vivid by poems and verses and jingles that were lit by pride in our heritage and, sometimes, by concern for its fragility'.⁶⁰ Some of the poems had appeared before the First World War in Kipling and Fletcher's *History of England* (1901). The programmes aired in May 1973, were repeated in August of that year and again in June 1974. Each of the five parts took a period of English history. Kipling's poems formed the core of the programmes, with Marghanita Laski providing a commentary on them. Part of this series' similarity to *The Long March of Everyman* lies in the vision of English history as something that both happens to and is made by ordinary English people. To emphasise this, both Laski and *The Long March of Everyman* arranged readers for the poems and contemporary extracts that were appropriate for the originating voices. Laski used well-known BBC voices such as John Arlott⁶¹ and Monty Modlyn⁶²; *The Long March* used mostly non-professionals whose accents clearly came from the places featured in the extracts.⁶³ Both wished to emphasise the diversity and also the 'ordinariness' of most English people.

Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England*

Having demonstrated his interest in the social history of the nation in his contribution to *The Long March of Everyman*, Briggs went on to write his own social history of England. Briggs distinguished between the task of a social historian, who elucidates shifts in social

⁵⁶ Barker, 8

⁵⁷ Barker, 7

⁵⁸ F M L Thompson, *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Aug., 2002) vii

⁵⁹ Marghanita Laski (1915-1988), read English at Oxford, novelist, literary critic and broadcaster; *Kipling's English History* BBC Publications 1974, 9

⁶⁰ Laski, 7

⁶¹ Well-known cricket commentator on radio; died 1991

⁶² Cockney broadcaster on radio and TV; died 1994

⁶³ Laski, un-numbered page 4; Barker, 8

relationships, and that of a political historian, who traces sequences of events.⁶⁴ He stressed that his book was intended to be the history of society, not social history, and so included England's political structure and the behaviour of its governing class, since their actions influenced everyone. Briggs' nation included only England: he considered that as far as social and cultural history were concerned, Scotland, Wales and Ireland had their own distinctive histories, so a focus on England was appropriate.⁶⁵ But his history was comprehensive in that it began with prehistory – its first chapter was called 'Unwritten History' – and continued to the 1970s. It was also comprehensive in weaving together the political, social, economic and cultural aspects.

Briggs was interested in structures and impersonal forces. He was clear that a great variety of circumstances and events influenced people's behaviour, both as individuals and in groups. He identified three major agents of change operating in the sixteenth century: religious change, population growth, and inflation. Hence he showed how the dissolution of the monasteries had both economic and political effects, how Cromwell's order that priests should keep records of births, marriages and deaths enabled historians now to track population changes in that period with some accuracy, and how inflation was related to population increases.⁶⁶ In showing the interconnectedness of different aspects of the past, he demonstrated his view that change occurs not only through individual decisions and external events such as plagues and famines, but also through collective movements. The 'Agricultural Revolution', he argued, was a tide of small changes, most originating in the seventeenth century; the Industrial Revolution was the consequence of 'technical progress [that] ...owed little directly to science and much to empirical efforts.'⁶⁷ When they were taken up by individuals, these inventions effected change in society. Thus for Briggs economic and especially technological change drove social change.

J F C Harrison, *The Common People: A History from the Norman Conquest to the Present*

Unlike Briggs, whose aim was to include the whole of society in his history, Harrison wrote the history of the 'common people' with little or no reference to prestige and power. He wanted to separate off the poor from the general history in which they have previously been submerged. He believed that most of the appeal of history was its connection with who we are: 'we identify more easily or comfortably with ordinary people than with kings and prime ministers'. Contemporary emphasis on grass roots democracy and cultural pluralism meant

⁶⁴ Briggs, 161

⁶⁵ Briggs, p xii-xiii

⁶⁶ Briggs, 131-144

⁶⁷ Briggs, 201, 218

that elites were regarded with suspicion and ordinary people thought to be more interesting and more likely to show the true values of their society.⁶⁸ He hoped that his readers would be the sort of people he had taught in adult education: steel workers in Middlesbrough, housewives and agricultural workers in villages, workers in woollen mills, and he aimed to show how their present had been shaped by their past.⁶⁹

Harrison's concentration on ordinary working people presupposed that these lives were worth studying and that they could be studied separately from the powerful groups whose activities affected their lives. Most of the history of the common people was not part of national history because, as Harrison pointed out, few had had the vote and few in authority took any account of them.⁷⁰ The topics covered were those that were important to working people day to day rather than major political events. Harrison suggested these would be work, family, popular mentalities, and indigenous forms of organisation.⁷¹ Whilst he recognised the problems about finding sources for the history of ordinary people, Harrison argued that many of them could be overcome and that it was possible to write the history of ordinary people. He concluded that it was absent because historians had not wanted to write it. Such unwillingness arose, he believed, from unfamiliarity with working class culture and a belief in the greater value of elite persons and the more literary sources for their history.⁷²

Harrison's theme was the growth of freedom, but freedom understood in a way very different from the parliamentary, legal and religious freedoms of histories of the elite. In the fourteenth century, the focus of emancipation was from serfdom or labour services, but later this developed into a more basic desire to escape the degradation of subordinate status and achieve recognition as fellow human beings.⁷³ And this desire echoes throughout Harrison's history of the common people. His common people evolved through four stages corresponding to the titles of the parts of his book: peasants, labouring people, working class and finally 'the people'. Harrison thus constructed his nation to include virtually only the working class. His common people exist in a society where the general conditions are 'given': he does not account much for their origin, or for the role of the elite or middle class in creating and changing or interacting with them, e.g. as employers. Partly, this reflects the focus on the condition of the common people, but it leads to a partial account of society. As a national

⁶⁸ Harrison, 13

⁶⁹ Telephone conversation with Harrison, 6 December 2011

⁷⁰ Harrison, 333

⁷¹ Harrison, 14

⁷² Harrison, 16-17

⁷³ Harrison, 43

history it is partial also in that it includes only England, Harrison finding, like Briggs, that he had 'neither space nor competence' to give Scotland, Wales and Ireland the 'special treatment' they require'.⁷⁴

Writing the history of the common people creates for the author issues different from those posed by the history of elites. Harrison argued that his task was to 'recreate the past as it felt to peasants...and artisans' but without producing 'the old "men and manners" type of social history'. To do this effectively, he thought, required the historian to 'suggest a pattern of the interconnectedness of events, and offer a tentative explanation'. Harrison argued that historians find different ways to do this, from complex Marxist theories to a general belief that things are getting better. The common people are viewed like organisms, in terms of development and evolution towards a particular end, often conceptualised as an increase in general happiness. Alternatively, the common people can be seen as 'an eternal presence', a group that essentially remains the same and so is outside history. This approach suggests a set of images (perhaps as in Hibbert's *The English: A Social History*) rather than a narrative, leading Harrison to conclude that an effective history of ordinary people must cover more than work and daily life.⁷⁵ He made good on this claim as his history included attitudes and beliefs, risings and protests, the family, economic relationships of workers and employers, the growth of towns and the development of the labour movement. However, this work would not be based on a particular theory of history. That this claim was disingenuous he recognised when he declared that the reader would be able to detect the author's assumptions and prejudices.⁷⁶ Clearly in Harrison's view the 'common people' in English history were worth writing about. But they had not been quite as neglected as he suggested: Cole and Postgate, and A L Morton both wrote histories featuring working people, there is a long tradition of labour history, and social history was being published as he wrote.

Maurice Ashley, *The People of England: A Social and Economic History*

Maurice Ashley created a more comprehensive nation than Harrison, but in a more conventional way. His social and economic history was a one-off for him; he was best known for his mainly political work on seventeenth century England, about which he published more than 30 books.⁷⁷ This book was unusual for him in two respects: it covered the whole span of English history from prehistoric times to the point of writing in 1981; and its focus was on social and economic history, not Ashley's usual field (political history). There was nothing in

⁷⁴ Harrison, 19-20

⁷⁵ Harrison, 17

⁷⁶ Harrison, 18-19

⁷⁷ Austin Woolrych, 'Obituary: Maurice Ashley', *The Independent*, 4 October 1994

the book to indicate why he produced it. He did, however, dedicate it to his uncle, Sir William Ashley, the well-known economic historian, of whom he said that his work first aroused his interest in the subject.⁷⁸

It was a straightforward chronological account making no particular argument. The periodisation was conventional, beginning with prehistory and ending with the present day. Among other things he considered the consequences of the civil war and surrounding events from the point of view of agriculture and the land sales from royalists to parliamentarians, trade and chartered companies, the price of grain and how its fall stimulated enclosure and reforms in agricultural production.⁷⁹ The brief references to constitutional, religious and political themes, which were the emphasis of his other works, helped to create a more inclusive account.

Towards the end of the book he reflected upon the conditions he experienced at the time he was writing, singling out advances in medicine as 'the outstanding social fact of his lifetime'.⁸⁰ Noting the contrast with the situation some 150 years before (i.e. c 1830s) in respect of lung disease, mental illness and the results of immunisations, among many other advances he deduced that 'medicine has helped to transform English society out of all recognition'.⁸¹ He concluded that progress had been made, life had improved, and to this extent Ashley's approach owed something to Whig history. Ashley thought that the size of the population was a key variable, the relationship between the numbers of people and the food available to support them being much as Malthus suggested. A rapidly increasing population was, he believed, a pre-requisite for industrial innovation and development, largely due to consequent increased domestic demand, including among agricultural workers.⁸² Industrial development meant that prices fell when the population rose, 'the biggest economic and social revolution in English history until modern times'.⁸³ Trade too had been a major source of England's wealth, especially in the later nineteenth century. England had profited from its natural resources, especially coal and oil, and the characteristics of its people, 'the skills of their inventors'.⁸⁴ Concerning social life, television was a great leveller, making all men [sic] equal, because most

⁷⁸ Maurice Ashley, *The People of England: A Short Social and Economic History*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982

⁷⁹ Ashley, 98-102

⁸⁰ Ashley, 197

⁸¹ Ashley, 198

⁸² Ashley, 200, 117

⁸³ Ashley, 202

⁸⁴ Ashley, 204

watched it and many discussed it.⁸⁵ His view of the meaning of the term 'egalitarian', while preceded by a description of how the position of women had changed, was not inclusive. As was common at the time, he used the term 'men' to mean the whole population. While he deplored the unwillingness of some trade unionists to adopt new technology, comparing them to the Luddites, he noted the habit of the English to look back to a mythical golden age, citing as examples among others, Belloc and Chesterton and their picture of contented 'merry' England.⁸⁶ He concluded that it was interests, personified in the concept of the Establishment that can be entered by merit, as much as class, that determined the nature of English society.⁸⁷

Plantagenet Somerset Fry, *2000 Years of British life*, and Christopher Hibbert, *The English: A Social History*

The other two works to be considered are much slighter. Fry asserted that his book was the first social history of Britain 'to tell how each of the four constituent peoples of the British Isles...lived, worked and enjoyed themselves throughout their long histories'.⁸⁸ Although he noted that 'the Celtic peoples of Britain are more and more anxious to establish their national identities', he treated events and lifestyles in the nations other than England much more briefly, covering 'Wales, Scotland and Ireland 13th to 17th centuries' in 16 pages of one chapter, followed by a further 22 pages to bring his account to the present. The book was largely Anglo-centric, although it clearly included Scotland, Wales and Ireland in its construction of 'Britain'. Even in an explicitly social history Fry used reigns as a periodising framework because 'the thread of British history lies in its monarchy'.⁸⁹ He explored the relationship of past and present in writing about Ireland for instance, where he noted that 'The Anglo- Norman invasion of Ireland in 1171-72 was the start of seven and a half centuries of exploitation of one people by another.' He stated: 'It is the lack of communication and therefore understanding between workers and bosses that lay at the root of the industrial unrest of the nineteenth century and still lies at it today.'⁹⁰ In this way he attempted what Briggs noted as a function of social history, namely to use the past to throw light on the present.⁹¹ But he did not engage at all with new approaches.

⁸⁵ Ashley, 194

⁸⁶ Ashley, 205-206

⁸⁷ Ashley, 208

⁸⁸ Plantagenet Somerset Fry (1931-1996), independent writer and editor at HMSO; *2000 Years of British Life: A Social History of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland* (Collins Glasgow 1976) introduction

⁸⁹ Fry, 7

⁹⁰ Fry, 190, 195

⁹¹ Briggs, ,xiii

Hibbert had originally intended to call his book *Scenes of English Life* (he did not explain why he changed it to *The English: a Social History*; possibly the publishers requested the change). The rejected title better characterises the book.⁹² Hibbert preferred to describe multiple scenes or vignettes broadly chronologically rather than to analyse how social structures and economic conditions changed over time. He made some links: for example, how changes in the size of population led to changes in wage rates before and after the Black Death, but this was at a rather simplistic level.⁹³ The topics with which he dealt most are leisure pursuits, work, education, travel, disease. Each of his chronological divisions except the most recent contained material on education; he portrayed leisure occupations and described dwellings from castles to cottages to slums over the whole period. Hibbert's nation was inclusive, comprising peasants, serfs, beggars, clergy, women, teachers and pupils, farmers and manufacturers, even children, as well as barons and gentry, but he made no attempt to analyse why and how social structures changed or how political events influenced social developments. He did not reach any settled conclusion, but ended with comments about how national unity had been promoted through the war effort (in the Second World War) and concluded that the hopes of building a better society expressed at the end of the First World War had yet to be realised.⁹⁴

The histories characterised as social history were of two different kinds. Barker, Briggs, Harrison and, to some extent, Ashley, expanded the category of the nation beyond its rulers and the political elite. To redress what they saw as an earlier imbalance, the authors emphasised the working class, the poor, both rural and city dwellers, and crucially most included women but not immigrants or non-whites. Writers like Harrison and Briggs, interested in bringing a wider range of people within the nation and society, gave more attention to structures and impersonal forces. They wanted to situate the changes in individual lives in a wider context of more general social change. In this way they tried to carry out Hobsbawm's prescription of writing the history of society rather than social history. The approach of non-professional historians was different; they continued to write 'men and manners' histories.

Narrators

⁹² Christopher Hibbert (1924-2008), biographer and independent historian

⁹³ Hibbert, 34

⁹⁴ Hibbert, 710

The writers of popular histories of the nation in the 1970s and 1980s were predominantly Oxford graduates (Ashley, Barker, Fry, Hibbert, Laski); the other two went to Cambridge. Briggs took a London external degree in economics as well as his Cambridge history degree; Fry had brief periods at St Thomas's Medical School and studying for a London external degree before getting his Oxford history degree. Four undertook military service in WW2: Briggs and Ashley were in Intelligence; Hibbert and Harrison in the infantry. Fry and Barker were too young. Four became academic historians (Ashley, Briggs, Barker, Harrison); the others were writers or journalists. From 1946 to 1967 Ashley was deputy editor, then editor, of *The Listener*. He also worked for Winston Churchill as research assistant as his first job on graduating from Oxford. Fry and Laski are unusual in the cohort: Laski as a woman (very few authors of popular histories in the twentieth century were women); Fry with his unique and eccentric personality. It is the professional historians who engage with new approaches to social history and use that method to write the history of the nation from a new perspective.

Reviews and receptions

The main question reviewers discussed concerning *The Long March of Everyman* was whether its transfer from radio to print worked. As Margaret Cole put it, 'that text...loses a great deal when it appears in cold print...without the...voices and sound effects'.⁹⁵ Even more unhappy with the outcome was the *Irish Times* whose reviewer complained, 'What was superb radio had now become a scrappy scissors-and-paste job. For those who heard the programmes it is unnecessary and for those who did not the best that can be said is that it may arouse an interest in the periods covered and in so doing lead them to other more scholarly work in the same vein.'⁹⁶ The opposite view was taken in *The Methodist Recorder* which thought it was, 'not, blessed escape, **another** Churchill's People, but a popular piece that eschews the esoteric and the arty crafty...and is readable and rewarding for its own sake and in its own right'.⁹⁷ This view was shared by the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*: 'If you believe that history is really about the lives of ordinary people rather than simply a chronicle of kings, battles and politics you will find immense satisfaction in *The Long March of Everyman*....a fascinating picture of grassroots history during the past 300 years.'⁹⁸ Theodore Zeldin writing in *The Listener* also liked it. He found it had a high level of scholarship and used a wide range of sources, resulting in 'a good

⁹⁵ Margaret Cole, 'Radicals and everyman', *Books and Bookmen* October 1975, 41

⁹⁶ Sylvia Secker, *The Irish Times* 5 April 1975

⁹⁷ *Methodist Recorder* 3 April 1975; *Churchill's People*, BBC series based on Churchill's *History of the English Speaking Peoples* in 26 50 minute episodes, broadcast December 1974 to June 1975

⁹⁸ *Coventry Evening Telegraph* 3 April 1975

bedside book, more readable than most academic collections of texts'.⁹⁹ A balanced view was expressed by *The Economist*, which liked it greatly on radio but felt that the transfer to print lost by reducing the amount of critical historical comment in favour of more quotation from sources – a point about context perhaps. Nevertheless, the review concluded, 'this book still transmits many varied and usually inaudible voices of the past'.¹⁰⁰ The series also stimulated letters of appreciation from members of the public to the BBC.¹⁰¹

By the time *A Social History of England* appeared in 1983, Briggs was a well-known historian. Great things were expected of his social history. Plumb in *The Times* thought that '...one might find a critical synthesis of all that has been written about demography and social history of the last twenty years'.¹⁰² However, F M L Thompson, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, hoped, given Asa Briggs' reputation, to find 'a high-level interpretation of English social history, a distillation of the new social history held together by an exposition of grand themes', but was disappointed that the task of 'fitting some sort of connected narrative of all the centuries' had resulted in so much compression that parts of the account might be thought to have shrunk to 'unrecognisable capsules of banality'.¹⁰³ Brian Harrison in the *New Statesman* also compared Briggs to Trevelyan, to the older historian's advantage. He believed that Trevelyan will remain because of his style, his strongly-held values and his juxtaposition of the growth of liberty with the harmful effects of the Industrial Revolution. However, Briggs's history was a 'courageous, nicely produced book that bulges with a wealth of factual information'.¹⁰⁴ It might have been an even more interesting book if Briggs had carried out the task his reviewers hoped for, but the book he actually wrote, believed J H Plumb, was 'an extremely vigorous narrative history...[providing] facts embedded in good sense in artfully short chapters'.¹⁰⁵ The reviewers perhaps underestimated the difficulty of writing a history that was 'total' not only in including political, economic and cultural as well as social aspects, but also in attempting a comprehensive synthesis of national history.

J F C Harrison's more thematic approach escaped some of the difficulties of the wide-ranging synthesis written by most other authors of popular national history. However, in their reviews, Harold Perkin and Richard S Thompson challenged his initial assertion that 'the people ... are usually left out of history'. They pointed out that 'English historians discovered the common

⁹⁹ Theodore Zeldin, 'Everybody's Everyman', the *Listener* 19 June 1975, 219

¹⁰⁰ *The Economist* 12 April 1975

¹⁰¹ André Deutsch archive

¹⁰² John Plumb, 'The Strength of English Society' *The Times* 15 September 1983, 9

¹⁰³ F M L Thompson, *Times Literary Supplement* 23 September 1983, 1013

¹⁰⁴ Brian Harrison, 'Our yesterdays' *New Statesman* 21 October 1984, 22

¹⁰⁵ Plumb, 'The Strength of English Society'

man over a century ago, and his story has been written and rewritten ever since', Perkin citing many, such as E P Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Peter Laslett, who had worked on 'the history of the "lower orders" and the working class since the Second World War'.¹⁰⁶ This caveat aside, some reviewers thought this 'people's history' could be recommended to 'those who want to find out the basic lineages of their own past' because 'simply "telling the truth" about the past is a vitally important part of a socialist education'.¹⁰⁷ Linda Colley and Iain McCalman both thought that Harrison's book, with its similar title, was trying to provide for the Thatcher era what G D H Cole (with Raymond Postgate) provided for the pre-war era with their *The Common People 1746-1938*. Harrison has since confirmed that he was trying to do this, signalling his intention in the title of his book with its echoes of Cole and Postgate.¹⁰⁸ Both reviewers considered too that Harrison's 'ability to appeal to a general audience' derived from his 'lucidity of expression' developed during his work in adult education.¹⁰⁹ Linda Colley was the only reviewer to note that Harrison concentrated solely on England (as did Briggs, although she did not mention him), leaving out Scotland, Wales and Ireland. She considered this lazy, and the reasons given – that these nations require special treatment – should not mean that historians omitted the presence of Scottish, Irish and Welsh workers in the labour force. This omission led them to leave out any British, as distinct from English, dimension to the working class experience.¹¹⁰ Harrison's work would however, according to Macdonald in *Albion*, have been more effective had he made a more rigorous and 'theoretically defensible definition of the common people'.¹¹¹ Macdonald claimed that Harrison was led to a question-begging conclusion that the main theme of English history was the poverty and powerlessness of ordinary men and women, when he had already defined the common people as those without wealth or power. He was thus unable to explain their situation.¹¹² Harrison 'is at his best invoking the thoughts and feelings of working people' in this 'often compelling and sometimes moving book'.¹¹³ His use of familiar sources would nevertheless 'still betray emotions and wring the heart'.¹¹⁴ It was thus 'part of a popular tradition of people's histories which seek, in great sweeps, to explain the history of the great mass of people to their descendants', 'and is

¹⁰⁶ Richard S Thompson, *AHR* vol 90 no 2 (April 1985), 409; Harold Perkin, *The Economic History Review*, new series, vol 38 no 1 (Feb 1985), 140

¹⁰⁷ Alun Howkins, 'Our Own People' *New Statesman* 4 May 1984, 26

¹⁰⁸ Telephone interview with Harrison, 6 December 2011

¹⁰⁹ Linda Colley review of Harrison, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, (no 32 Fall 1987) 99; Iain McCalman review of Harrison, *Labour History* no. 48 (May 1985) 112

¹¹⁰ Colley, review, 100

¹¹¹ Michael Macdonald, *Albion* vol 17 no 1 (Spring 1985) 93

¹¹² Macdonald, 93

¹¹³ Macdonald, 93, 94

¹¹⁴ Harold Perkin, *The Economic History Review* New Series vol 38 no 1 (February 1985) 140

likely to be the best short introduction to the long march of everyman and every woman for a long time to come'.¹¹⁵

Hibbert attracted two reviews: from Julian Critchley in *History Today* and from the American Walter Arnstein in *Historian*.¹¹⁶ Critchley thought that, because it was a 'massive encyclopaedia', it would be useful to students, but he did little more than summarise the book (the dates of which he mistakenly gives as 1065 to 1965, hence his review title, '1065 and All That'). Arnstein considered it to be a historical 'cookie jar', nibbling from which might benefit some students.

Ashley's social history was not well reviewed. Commenting in *The London Review of Books* in a review of three books, Peter Clarke gave it only a brief mention, devoting the great proportion of his review to Martin Pugh's *The Making of Modern British Politics*. Yet he thought that Ashley had made sense of the fundamental transformation of English society over two millennia and that this constituted 'scholarly improvisation'. The reviewer in *Virginia Quarterly Review* considered it pleasant but that it darted from one topic to another with inadequate footnotes, concluding that it was 'quite unsatisfying'.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Writing the history of the nation, Briggs, and to some extent Harrison, took up the approach of the history of society rather than social history, to which Hobsbawm drew attention in his 1970 essay 'From Social History to the History of Society'.¹¹⁸ Historians were beginning to construct England (and these histories were almost all about England exclusively) to incorporate more groups in society. They began to include members of society who were not the political elite – although their society was not yet further divided by race or gender – and to understand the great majority of the population as having a role to play in the nation's history and identity. These histories, like E P Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, were more explicit about their theoretical and sometimes their political stance than most previous works. They

¹¹⁵ Howkins, 28; Perkin, 141

¹¹⁶ Julian Critchley, '1065 and All That' *History Today* vol 37 no 7 (July 1987) 54-55; Walter Arnstein, review in *Historian* vol 51 no 4 (August 1989) 652

¹¹⁷ Peter Clarke, *London Review of Books*, 17 February 1983; Review of Maurice Ashley, 'The People of England: A Short Social and Economic History' in *Virginia Quarterly Review* vol 60 no 1 (Winter 1984) 7

¹¹⁸ Hobsbawm, 'From Social History to the History of Society'

showed an interest in analysing the structure of society: Briggs's narrative was punctuated at various points by his accounts of the different groups making up the society at particular times, the land and wealth they owned (or did not) and the degree of social mobility. Missing, it now seems glaringly, was any reference to women, or to race. By the mid 1980s the excitement about the explanatory power of writing history as the history of society began to lessen.¹¹⁹ It seemed that its very success in greatly expanding the field of enquiry led to its loss of direction. By including an ever-increasing number of areas of study, social history began to divide into separate fields, rather than retaining and developing its ability to account for historical change as a whole. No such problems existed for national history told from a more firmly political perspective.

Even by 1998, when a Witness Seminar on 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s' gathered many well-known social and other historians to discuss historiographical changes in those decades, historians were still dissatisfied with the transformation of social history to a comprehensive approach. Professor Charles Phythian-Adams (Head of the Department of English Local History at Leicester and a participant in the Witness Seminar) expressed this view clearly:

But I still don't see much sign of that total history towards which we all aspire, or used to aspire. We all pay lip-service to it and we all say how desirable it is, but it is extraordinarily difficult to do, especially at a national level, unless you simply have separate chapters on economic history, political history, religious history, and so on. One of the reasons for a lack of excitement in some recent syntheses is that the authors have lacked a sense of total history, and in particular have not got to grips with the problems in writing about society and culture. We have not thought enough about societal history as opposed to the history of society.¹²⁰

However, the new paradigm created by historians of Britain for its national history was not produced in response to the challenges of writing comprehensive history. Some, rather, took up the challenge from J A Pocock to reconceptualise the history of Britain as the history of interlinked polities: four nations history.

¹¹⁹ Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Culture* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor USA 2005) 90-91

¹²⁰ 'Witness Seminar: New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s' edited by Jim Obelkevich, *Contemporary British History*, vol 14 no 4 (Winter 2000) 159

CHAPTER 8 HISTORY IN THE 1990S: ONE NATION OR FOUR NATIONS?

- 1989 Kearney, Hugh *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* CUP
1992 Hibbert, Christopher, *The Story of England*, Phaidon Press
Elton, Geoffrey, *The English*, Blackwell, Oxford
1996 Black, Jeremy *A History of the British Isles* Palgrave Macmillan
1997 Lee, Christopher, *This Sceptred Isle*, BBC/Penguin
1998 Strong, Roy, *The Story of Britain: A People's History*, Pimlico
Robbins, Keith, *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness*, Longman
2000 Lee, Christopher, *The Twentieth Century* Penguin
2002 Frank Welsh, *The Four Nations: A History of the United Kingdom* HarperCollinsPublishers

Context

It is not new to view the British Isles as a group of four nations. The official title of the nation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, indicates that it is a multi-national state. The devolution of Scotland and Wales since 1999 also reminds us that the nation is not a unitary state. But histories of the nation have usually been written as histories of England. English political control was followed by English domination in the writing of national history.¹ During the 1970s and increasingly in the 1980s, concern about the nature of Britishness and the structure of the United Kingdom led to some rethinking of the national narrative. 1989 saw the appearance of the first comprehensive history of the nation (except for Hearnshaw's in 1938, see chapter 3) written explicitly outside the traditional framework, Hugh Kearney's *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*. Kearney challenged traditional narratives of English or British history in which England, its institutions and freedoms, were the focus of the story, and tried instead to explore the links between England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland and their distinctive features throughout their history. In the 1990s, some other historians adopted the 'new British history' and wrote very different versions of it. Kearney's explicitly four nations approach engaged clearly with contemporary concerns about the nature of the British state but not all historians adopted it whole-heartedly. Traditional, Anglo-centric history that did not connect directly with contemporary concerns about the nature of the British state continued to appeal. While many historians accepted that the history of Britain could be conceived differently from English history, little agreement obtained on how this should be written and whether it was worthwhile.

¹ Richard S Tompson, *The Atlantic Archipelago: A Political History of the British Isles* (The Edwin Mellon Press, Queenston Ontario 1986) 4

Origins of four nations history

Earlier national histories had found no difficulty with the idea of the nation when writing the history of Britain. However, from the late 1960s and early 1970s, the union of the United Kingdom could no longer be taken for granted.² Unrest in Northern Ireland and the abolition of the province's parliament raised the question of the status of the province. Increasing calls were made for home rule if not independence for Wales, and especially Scotland, and nationalist MPs were elected. The possibility of devolution to either or both these nations was much debated, calling into question the structure of the United Kingdom and increasing awareness that the United Kingdom contained more than one nation. Decolonisation and increased immigration also made Britishness a category of enquiry and concern. Lastly, joining the EEC in 1972 meant closer identification with Europe, in contrast to seeing England/Britain as different from, if not opposed to, most other European nations, again, bringing national identity in question.

These concerns had already resulted in historiography that was not determinedly Anglo-centric. An early work using the Four Nations approach was Michael Hechter's *Internal Colonialism*.³ Published in 1975, this used a model of 'core' and 'periphery' to explore relationships within the British Isles, although, according to Kearney and G A Bryant, it presented the constituent parts as too homogeneous.⁴ Work by Conrad Russell showing that the Civil War had been a War of Three Kingdoms, by R R Davies on the early medieval period, and by Keith Robbins on nineteenth century Britain, operated within a wider conception of Britain and its constituent parts.⁵ Historians became interested in how the sense of Britishness had arisen and what it consisted in, leading to a clutch of articles and books, notably Linda Colley's *Britons; Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (1992). Appreciating that 'Britain' and 'Britishness' had an 'uncertain nature', a number of historians came together in 1994 in London to discuss 'The Formation of the United Kingdom', leading to a book containing many

² David Cannadine, 'Nation' in *Making History Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies and Explorations* (Palgrave 2008) 180

³ Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: the Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1975)

⁴ Kearney, 'Four Nations History in Perspective', *Ireland: Contested Ideas of Nationalism and History* (New York University Press, New York 2007) 160; G A Bryant, *The Nations of Britain* (OUP, Oxford 2007) 47

⁵ Conrad Russell, *Causes of the English Civil War* (OUP 1990); R R Davies, *The British Isles 1100-1500: comparisons, contrasts and connections* (John Donald Edinburgh 1988); Keith Robbins, *Nineteenth Century Britain: England, Scotland and Wales: the Making of a Nation*, (OUP 1989)

of their contributions.⁶ Together with Tom Nairn's well-known *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977) these histories demonstrated that England's dominance in the national story could no longer be taken for granted.⁷

In spite of these developments, a major event in historical publishing, the New Oxford History of England, retained the history of England as its focus, clearly conceived and commissioned well before the first volume, Paul Langford's *A Polite and Commercial People 1727-1783*, appeared in 1989. Explaining – and defending – the description of this multi-author work as a history of England, the general editor, J M Roberts, claimed in his preface that

The new Oxford History of England is intended to... give an account of the development of our country in time. It is hard to treat that development as just the history which unfolds within the precise boundaries of England, and a mistake to suggest that this implies a neglect of the histories of the Scots, Irish and Welsh. Yet the institutional core of the story which runs from Anglo-Saxon times to our own is the story of a state structure built round the core of the English monarchy, and its effective successor, the Crown in Parliament, and that provides the only continuous articulation of the history of peoples today we call British.... The state story remains nevertheless a continuous thread and to me appears still to justify the title both of this series and that of its predecessor.

While Roberts recognised that unreflectingly writing the history of the nation as the history of England was no longer possible, the New Oxford History's coverage, and, significantly, its title, proclaimed that it was not engaging with the idea of relating national history from a more inclusive, Britannic perspective. In practice some volumes took a wider view than others. Roberts also recognised that a wider view meant that it was harder to work within an agreed understanding of periodisation and the relevance of particular episodes in a national story. Some of the component volumes covered periods not divided by reigns but by other significant events or turning points, for example *England under the Norman and Angevin kings 1075-1225* by Robert Bartlett, and *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* by Boyd Hilton.

Some of these new approaches may have been stimulated by an influential article published in 1975 by J A Pocock, arguing for a reconceptualisation of the history of the British Isles as a

⁶ P K O'Brien, Foreword in Alistair Grant and Keith J Stringer, *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History* (Routledge 1995)

⁷ Stefan Berger, 'A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France and Britain from 1945 to the Present', *The Journal of Modern History* vol 77 (September 2009) 648

'New Subject'.⁸ Pocock argued for paying attention to the wider context, particularly that of the British Isles, in which the history of England is situated.⁹ He argued that no histories of Britain had properly covered the whole of Britain and Ireland. Instead there had been histories of England in which other peoples appeared only when their activities affected English affairs. Separate histories of Scotland, Wales and Ireland had also been written. Recognising that he was proposing a new approach, he called his topic 'an essay in historical restatement'.¹⁰ The new approach became known as 'Four Nations history', nicely characterising the attitude of its protagonists, and it was much discussed following Pocock's piece and his later articles in 1982 and 1992.

A further stimulus to rethinking the national narrative in Britain was the introduction in 1992 of the National Curriculum. Debates about what should be taught to children intensified during the 1980s as a History Working Group of officials and teachers, set up by the Conservative Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker, discussed proposals for the history syllabus within the National Curriculum.¹¹ Conservative politicians sought to mobilise the national narrative to support their political vision by recasting it as a traditional story of national greatness. The participants in the Working Group and others were forced to confront questions of the role history played in creating national identity. An important aspect of the debate was how to strike a balance between the common elements that all citizens of the UK shared and the plurality of the British experience.¹²

There is room for both nation-based histories and Britannic histories. Constructing the history of England/Britain as the creation and interaction of several nations, as Pocock thought, rather than the history of a single nation, was increasingly discussed.¹³ Focusing on England as the only means of articulating the continuous history of the peoples who live in the British Isles seemed unsatisfactory at a time when the nature of the United Kingdom was so much questioned.

⁸ John Pocock: historian of political thought, part of the Cambridge School of intellectual history with John Dunn and Quentin Skinner, argued for understanding political theory in the context in which it was written; studied under Butterfield at Cambridge; returned to his native New Zealand before taking up posts in the USA, at Washington University St Louis Missouri in 1968 and at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore in 1975

⁹ John Pocock, 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', *AHR*, vol 47 no 4 (1975) 601-28

¹⁰ Pocock 1975, 601

¹¹ David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2011) 193-4

¹² Alice Prochaska, 'The History Working Group: Reflections and Diary' *History Workshop* no 30 1990, 83

¹³ John Pocock, 'The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of a New Subject', *AHR* vol 87 no 2 (April 1982) 311-336

The national story in the 1990s

However, not all historians of the nation found the 'New British history', as it also became known, exciting and relevant. Historians continued to write Anglo-centric history as one of three ways in which historians wrote British national history in the 1990s. Elton, Hibbert, Lee and Strong all constructed the nation principally as England. They did not engage with 'Four Nations History'. a second version was adopted by Black. He included all four in his history but did not explore the inter-relations of the nations as much as write parallel histories, moving between the four nations. Last, Kearney, Robbins and Welsh engaged fully with the new British history but wrote very different versions of it.

Geoffrey Elton, *The English*

Of authors writing national histories from an Anglo-centric point of view, Elton was the most significant as a professional historian. However, possibly precisely because he was important in his own field of sixteenth century English history, his contribution to the genre of popular national histories perhaps made less impact than that of Roy Strong, a well-known figure, or by Christopher Lee, whose work was widely disseminated on radio and through audio recording. Elton's *The English* was part of a series by Blackwell designed to be anthropological and ethnological as much as historical. Elton was invited to contribute in June 1989 by the editors, Barry Cunliffe and John Stevenson, who both thought that he was by far the best person to write such a survey.¹⁴ However, he found the book difficult to write. In the introduction he explained that he was unable to provide a book in the style of the series, but that the editors had accepted his survey essay, which concentrated on political and ideological events.¹⁵ As he told John Davey, Editorial Director at Blackwells: 'I don't think I have ever been so uncertain what I might possibly do about a book as I am in this case'.¹⁶

Both John Davey and John Stevenson thought that the book had potential for use by students although both doubted its suitability as a principal textbook. Davey, (who had moved to Cambridge Massachusetts), considered that 'there is a very good chance that it may, as a subsequent paperback, be used as supplemental reading – and that is a large market in itself' – referring to the American market. Stevenson was even more hopeful about the English market, commenting: 'Its learning and intellectual verve are such that there must be a good

¹⁴ Barry Cunliffe to Geoffrey Elton, 20 June 1989, Elton's personal papers, Royal Historical Society archives (hereafter Elton's papers)

¹⁵ Elton, *The English* (Blackwell Oxford 1992) xi

¹⁶ Geoffrey Elton to John Davey, 28 July 1989, Elton's papers

possibility of its becoming the standard brief one volume history of England; and if, as I suppose is likely, it is translated into other languages it may well, for many, provide all they will ever know about our history.¹⁷

Elton argued that England had a continuous existence since the tenth century, although it took time for the Anglo-Saxons to turn into the English. However, by 1272, 'its people now very definitely thought of themselves as one and as English'.¹⁸ Their early nationhood, their conviction of their superiority, their liking for rural life while also possessing expertise in trade and industry, their belief in their imperial destiny, together created 'enduring characteristics'. He regarded the monarchy, with the law and administrative systems, as the constant framework within which gradual change took place, from the eleventh to the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.¹⁹ The character of the English was of 'tolerant superiority and grim xenophobia' in the thirteenth century, little changed by the fifteenth when Elton found their behaviour to range from 'kindly superiority to embittered chauvinism'.²⁰ So much was this book only about the English that Elton covered the nineteenth century, the period of the union of Great Britain and Ireland, and the twentieth only briefly. He lamented the 'traumatic change' by which the English 'turned into the British' when they were 'totally subsumed into the larger entity of the British – a nationality but not a nation, a gathering but not a people'.²¹ In Elton's view, only the English possessed the characteristics of a nation. He seemed to think that, if other groups, the culturally distinct inhabitants of Scotland, Wales or Ireland, were included with the English, their differences would mean that they could not constitute one nation.

Christopher Hibbert, *The Story of England*

While Elton wrote of England's long continuity, Hibbert concentrated on nation building. Although he made occasional references to Scotland, Wales and Ireland in his text, Hibbert's maps at the back all showed England only, and almost all his illustrations show only English images, contributing visually to a clearly Anglo-centric narrative. His chapter headings, too, almost all refer to 'England', and the people were the English not the British. Hibbert wrote a straightforward, brief account of what he regarded as the most important people and events in England's history, those concerned with how the political nation was formed. To this end, he

¹⁷ John Davey to Geoffrey Elton, 1 May 1992; John Stevenson to Geoffrey Elton, 5 April 1992, Elton's papers. There is no information in Elton's papers about any translation.

¹⁸ Elton, 1, 2, 69

¹⁹ Elton, 213, 214

²⁰ Elton, 69, 11

²¹ Elton, 233

covered the relations of monarch and barons/aristocracy/parliament. The book was divided into four periods, four areas of emphasis. First was Britain as a melting pot, melding the different peoples who had come there to settle. Second, the creation of the nation of England, which Hibbert concluded in 1381. It was not that he saw no further nation building after that, but he considered the theme of English history from the end of the fourteenth century until 1660 to be the struggle for power between monarchy and aristocracy. The nation was achieved when 'the law was reconciled with liberty', and this had been achieved by the reign of George I.²² The fourth part covers rather rapidly the development of Empire, industrialisation and domestic reform in administration, constitution and welfare. Hibbert had little interest in war or Empire, preferring to concentrate on developments at home.

Christopher Lee, *This Sceptred Isle*

The histories by Strong and Lee suggest in their titles that they were histories of Britain. Neither fulfilled these claims. They are also Anglo-centric histories. *This Sceptred Isle*, a print version of the series initially on radio, took as its subject 'the people who have lived in Britain since the Romans invaded in 55 BC', and the 'conditions in which the people of these islands have lived', but Lee provided little on Scotland, Wales or Ireland.²³ Explicitly not written for academics, the purpose of both *This Sceptred Isle* and *This Sceptred Isle: The Twentieth Century* was to encourage in readers and listeners an interest in their national history and to put the last century in perspective given its exceptionally rapid changes.²⁴ The first series was broadcast in daily 15-minute episodes between June 1995 and June 1996. It was very successful, and in 1999 the BBC extended the series to cover the twentieth century.

This Sceptred Isle used over 200 extracts from contemporary sources including histories, chronicles, correspondence public and private, reports of significant events, diary extracts, parliamentary speeches and reports. Their use was illustrative only, so that while it is informative to have contemporary views on events, there is no attempt to evaluate the extracts. They were treated as equally authoritative. Although this approach creates attractive radio, the lack of critical distance in the published text makes it seem naïve. Extracts from Churchill's *History of the English Speaking Peoples*, also used as illustration, ran through the book as a spine. Lee divided the material largely by reigns, viewing monarchs as meaningful for understanding change. In the subsequent book on the twentieth century, he divided it into sections by decades, and within each section wrote a piece on each year somewhat like a

²² Christopher Hibbert, *The Story of England* (Phaidon Press 1992) 147

²³ Lee, *This Sceptred Isle* (BBC/Penguin 1998) v

²⁴ *This Sceptred Isle* p vi; *This Sceptred Isle C20th* (BBC/Penguin 2000) viii

medieval chronicle. Such a structure is fragmentary, juxtaposing events that have in common only that they happened at the same time, failing to demonstrate connections and a broader sweep. Lee did not present broad patterns, but individual events – lots of trees but not much of a wood.

This Sceptred Isle invites comparison with the earlier BBC radio history of England, *The Long March of Everyman*, broadcast between November 1971 and May 1972.²⁵ The differences are notable. The titles alone show how dissimilar were the conceptions of national history on offer. The 1970s version emphasised the common people's experience through time, using voices from the regions and those of non-professionals to show the nation's diversity and to assert that this was definitely not a history of or for elites. *This Sceptred Isle*, on the other hand, was concerned with '...the study of kingship and the development of what are now seen as the great institutions in our society'. Changing social conditions were mentioned, but just in passing.²⁶

The Long March of Everyman and *This Sceptred Isle* appeared in different formats, and used different supporting material. Some of these differences were due to changing technologies. While book versions of both appeared, (although of just the latter part of *The Long March of Everyman*), only *This Sceptred Isle* benefited from the sale of recordings as plans to release recordings of *The Long March of Everyman* came to nothing (see chapter 7). *This Sceptred Isle* was widely seen as conventional, old-fashioned (which many of the public loved but professional historians hated) and *The Long March of Everyman* as history of the people for the people. *The Long March of Everyman* has almost vanished from view; *This Sceptred Isle* remains available, with later versions on the twentieth century, Empire and Dynasties, attractively produced boxed sets of recordings, disseminating the work more widely than to the original audience. Books accompanying each series – at least the ones on the first series and on the Twentieth Century – sold well. Why the difference? In the intervening thirty years there has been more book publishing and buying; there are sound versions in convenient cassette or CD form; perhaps they received more publicity. As the BBC correctly judged, at the end of the twentieth century the traditional story told in *This Sceptred Isle* remained popular. At the beginning of the twenty-first, a British history (by Simon Schama), this time for television, was if anything even more popular. Again the changing media helped to create a new audience.

²⁵ See Chapter 7

²⁶ *This Sceptred Isle*, v

Roy Strong, *The Story of Britain: A People's History*

Strong also correctly pitched his *Story of Britain* to appeal widely, writing explicitly for a popular audience. Discussing its genesis, Strong said, 'I have become appalled by the tide of ignorance I see around me. Things I took for granted that everybody knew – you can't just assume anything any more. I started writing initially for young people, but, as the book developed, it seemed to become an introduction for anyone, really.'²⁷ Strong's story is about monarchs and their activities: conventional, traditional history. He presents monarchy as the glue holding the nation together.

There is a mismatch between Strong's declared aims – to write a history to make young people think about 'what it is that unites them in being British' – and his achievement.²⁸ This book is Anglo-centric history, although it was called, at the request of the publishers, *The Story of Britain*. Strong recognised that it contained too little on Scotland, but, wanting to keep the narrative flow, found he could not switch back and forth between England and Scotland. He later felt that the book had dated since Scottish and Welsh devolution, and that it would not now be possible to write that sort of history of Britain, which he thought was highly likely to break apart.²⁹ Due to his lack of attention to Scotland, Wales and Ireland and to the formation of the larger entity of Great Britain, or the United Kingdom, he does not provide any material from which readers might construct an understanding of a British identity.

Historians who were aware of contemporary issues about the structure and identity of the British nation and how these could be demonstrated in the national narrative, chose approaches consistent with these concerns. One approach, adopted by Black (and Hearnshaw in the 1930s), was to write parallel, rather than integrated histories of the nations comprising Britain. Many will think Kearney's *The British Isles: a History of Four Nations* published in 1989 the first comprehensive history in a four nations' framework. But that would be to miss Hearnshaw's earlier *Outlines of the History of the British Isles* (1938) discussed in chapter 3.

Jeremy Black, *History of Britain*

Jeremy Black's *History of Britain* was commissioned by the publishers, Palgrave Macmillan, unlike Kearney's, which was not commissioned.³⁰ It is more concerned with interactions between the separate nations than with a truly British dimension exploring a coherent common culture. Black aimed to 'give due weight to England' as if other histories somehow

²⁷ John Walsh on Roy Strong, Independent, 7 September 1996

²⁸ Strong, xi

²⁹ Interview with Sir Roy Strong 1st September 2010

³⁰ Interview with Jeremy Black 10 August 2010; email from Hugh Kearney 29 September 2010

marginalised this dominant element in our national history.³¹ He thought of his book as a reaction against four nations history in so far as it maintained a disproportionate amount on England. He also acknowledged that there was too much on Wales. He deliberately did not include an equal share for Scotland and Ireland because he thought that Kearney's book dramatically underplayed England and its regionalism.³²

Black's *History of Britain* was more concerned with the histories of the separate nations than with a truly British dimension exploring a coherent common culture. He noted that the history of the British Isles is the history of its separate peoples and argued that these divisions justify a deliberate structure in which each nation is covered separately in turn.³³ He agreed that such a structure made it difficult to focus on linkages, but described his book as 'an interim report, work in progress, like all history'.³⁴ By underlining the separation, he emphasised the contingent nature of the eventual formation of the United Kingdom.³⁵ Black asserted that his was not a Whiggish history, unlike those of Strong and Schama, but rather it emphasised choice. He implied that he did not wish to be restricted to 'the comforting pattern of a conventional approach and narrative' and that his work did not contribute to the perpetuation of national myths.³⁶ But writing parallel narratives that privilege the position of England calls into question the intention to write a 'British' history.

Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*

Kearney and Robbins, who had both worked for a time outside England but within the British Isles, were the only historians considered here who kept a wide focus throughout.³⁷ Kearney called his book *The British Isles*, emphasising Britain as a geographical rather than a political concept, titling it 'A History of Four Nations' to indicate that it is not a history of the English or even the British nation. He declined to use the national structure that he considered helped to perpetuate 'ethnocentric myths and ideologies' and to prevent a greater understanding of the complex of polities and cultures that make up the British Isles.³⁸ He criticised the historical interpretation that viewed England as a single national culture, related to other cultures in Britain.³⁹ Rather, he thought it was more useful to discuss 'the "Britannic melting pot" in terms of a complex of interacting cultures'. This approach revealed several distinctive cultures

³¹ Black, xii

³² Interview with Jeremy Black 10 August 2010

³³ Black, xii

³⁴ Interview with Jeremy Black 10 August 2010

³⁵ Black, xi

³⁶ Black, xii, xvi

³⁷ Kearney taught in Dublin, Sussex and Edinburgh; Robbins in York, Wales and Glasgow

³⁸ Kearney, 1

³⁹ Kearney, 143

existing within the British Isles. Areas such as Wales and Scotland were shown to contain more than one culture, while England displayed a metropolitan, American influenced culture contrasting with provincial sub-cultures. These cultures changed over time, crossing national boundaries and absorbing new ways of life from immigrants and overseas influences.⁴⁰

Kearney's theme was the need to explain how and why England became so dominant within the British Isles.⁴¹ He argued that a sense of national unity did not arise quickly in England or indeed in the other three nations. Within each, changing cultures existed, some of which had more in common with cultures in one of the other nations (Ulster Protestants with Scots Presbyterians for example) than within their own. Nor was the success of some events inevitable as some (Whig) historians suggested. The revolution of 1688 met strong resistance in Scotland and Ireland; the union of Scotland and England was not cemented until after the defeat of the '45.⁴² Both contingency and individual decisions were important in deciding the outcomes of significant events.

Each of Kearney's chapters covered events in each part of the British Isles that later became England Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The chapters were not divided into separately headed sections; the topic was integrated in the narrative structure. As might be expected, events in each of the four countries were treated at lengths appropriate to their significance, but the significance assessed against a somewhat Anglo-centric background. Kearney demonstrated how events in one nation produced responses in another. For example, he explained how the increased demand in England for wool for the cloth trade led to a rise in wool production in Wales that in turn increased English cultural influence.⁴³ Kearney made illuminating comparisons between the nations. Scotland experienced a potato famine as did Ireland, but the results were not identical: in Scotland, aid could reach those affected and landlords were more generous.⁴⁴ And while nineteenth century Wales was similar to Ireland, the industrial exploitation of coal and iron in Wales created different social and economic development.⁴⁵ He adopted the concept of culture as his analytical category, drawing the focus away from interpreting the past as the history of political units, of the possibly spurious continuity of the entities, England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. He concentrated instead on life-styles,

⁴⁰ Kearney, 1-12

⁴¹ Kearney, 13

⁴² Kearney, x

⁴³ Kearney, 127

⁴⁴ Kearney, 223

⁴⁵ Kearney, 218

customs, religion and attitudes to the past without being confined by a national perspective.⁴⁶ These were the realities, he believed, that lay behind the label nation/state.⁴⁷ For the second edition in 2006, Kearney added a chapter on the 1990s and post-devolution Britain, and some additional material in the form of postscripts to chapters in which he commented on how he might shift the emphasis, or might include new material now available. He also acknowledged that he 'could have paid more attention to class, political reform, gender etc'.⁴⁸

Keith Robbins, *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness*

Keith Robbins in *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness* best set out the elements from which the nation of Great Britain was constructed, particularly the structural, constitutional and religious elements that Robbins regarded as important constituents of the nation. The series editors' intention to provide another volume that would cover Ireland alone meant that Robbins was not able to cover Ireland or discuss the question of how far 'John Bull's other island' was part of Britain. Robbins' nation includes Scotland and Wales throughout, examining their interactions at each stage. He was also more interested in the British abroad than the other authors whose work is being considered here, considering links between the British at home and in the Empire, (decolonisation) the USA (culture) and Europe (the EEC).

He focused on the relations of Scotland, Wales and England with each other, more a 'three nations' than a 'four nations' history, but notable in covering the relations and effects of each on the other explicitly and fully. Hence, it can be seen as a history of its time. The accession of James to the English throne created one ruler in the island, if two kingdoms, so that 1603 is arguably the date at which 'Britain' became a political reality. However, a case could also be made for choosing 1707 as the founding date. In fact, he argued, there is no clear founding moment. The idea of 'Britain', although not coterminous with Roman Britannia, was an important imaginary driving later rulers' ambitions to rule the whole island.⁴⁹

Frank Welsh, *The Four Nations: A History of the United Kingdom*

Frank Welsh's history on the other hand was unusual in focusing massively on Ireland in the twentieth century.⁵⁰ England, Scotland and Wales were almost ignored except for material on their wish for devolution. The theme of Welsh's history is that relations between the

⁴⁶ Kearney, 5

⁴⁷ Kearney, 6

⁴⁸ Email from Hugh Kearney 5 November 2010

⁴⁹ Keith Robbins, *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness* (Longman 1998) 4

⁵⁰ Frank Welsh, born in England, Cambridge University, international business and independent writer

constituent parts of the UK have been characterised by reciprocal involvement. The final shape of the United Kingdom has been the result of contingency and chance, a theme that Black also emphasises. There was nothing inevitable about its eventual outcome. Welsh found connections between the constituent parts from the beginning: Scotland, Ireland and Gaul shared culture and language in the first centuries BC and AD; migration from Ireland to Scotland linked cultures. Because Welsh treated the four nations so unevenly, the book does not live up to its title.

A key feature of Welsh's book is his use of comparisons, often very illuminating, between the historical events described and more recent events, including with the superior attitude of the British in India or Africa (Welsh also wrote books on South African, Australian and Hong Kong history) and the similar attitude of the Romans or the Normans. One particularly enlightening comparison is between the treatment of Irish people by the English government during the Famine, seen at the time as bitter but necessary medicine to secure future prosperity, with the economic policies of the Thatcher government in the 1980s.

In the 1990s, four nations history was far from the usual approach to national history. Most authors focused on their readers, seeking to write appealing popular history, and continued to write in more traditional ways. Apart from Welsh, who emphasises Ireland far more than other historians writing at this time, it is the historians who themselves had a 'four nations' professional background, Kearney and Robbins, who wrote history from a most clearly defined 'new British history' approach.

Narrators

Kearney and Robbins, who both lived and worked in at least three of four nations, wrote the history of Britain most clearly in a four nations model. Born in Liverpool, Kearney's first academic job after Cambridge was at University College, Dublin where he stayed for 12 years. He moved to Sussex, then to Edinburgh, then to Pittsburgh USA where he wrote his book on British history. He thus had experience of being a historian in four countries. In his preface to *Ireland: Contested Ideas of Nationalism and History*, he explains how his stay at UCD made him

realise how Anglo-centric his Cambridge education had been.⁵¹ Reflecting on his academic career, Kearney commented:

Looking back, it was the impact of my own teaching in Ireland which led to me appreciate how Anglocentric much of history teaching had been at Cambridge...There was no British Isles history...From 1964, at Sussex I taught a course Politics and Literature in the Age of Yeats and Joyce which showed how important Home Rule was its own right, not merely as “the Irish problem” in English history. I should also mention that in *Scholars and Gentlemen; Universities and Society in Pre-Industrial Britain* I discussed Scotland, Ireland and Harvard as well as Oxford and Cambridge. I also wrote an overview about the modern period in a final chapter...When I went to the USA in 1975 I came to see that Irish American approaches could also be limited. After planning a history of Ireland I then moved to writing a history of the British Isles. It was about this time also that John Pocock called for a “new British History”, although I was not consciously influenced by this.⁵²

Keith Robbins also noted that his understanding of British history came from working in more than one country of the British Isles. ‘Such a peregrination inevitably leads to a concern with “Britishness”’.⁵³ He worked at York University before moving to University College Bangor in 1971; in 1980 he went to Glasgow; In 1992 Robbins was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales, Lampeter where he wrote his book on British history. He remained at the University of Wales until retirement. He too realised how the concentration on English history at Oxford in the late 1950s came to feel odd. At York he developed a less Anglo-centric history of these islands. At Bangor and Glasgow he taught British history (though not Welsh or Scottish history). A long career working in this area led him to try to ‘convey fluctuating ways in which [British] identities have been perceived and constructed, dissolved, started again and reinterpreted’.⁵⁴

Elton also brought an unusual background to the writing of English history, that of a Jewish schoolboy from Prague who came to Britain as a refugee in 1939. He took an external London degree in Ancient History while teaching at Rydal School. On leaving the army, he held a lectureship at Glasgow, and in 1949 moved to Cambridge where he spent the rest of his long academic career. Reviewers (e.g., Wormald, Richmond, Newman) commented on Elton’s being

⁵¹ Hugh Kearney, *Ireland: Contested Ideas of Nationalism and History* (New York University Press, New York USA 2007) 12

⁵² email interview with Hugh Kearney 29 September 2010

⁵³ Keith Robbins, ‘Varieties of Britishness’, 259, and ‘“Insular Outsider: British History” and European Integration’, in *History, Religion and Identity in Modern Britain* (The Hambledon Press 1993) 259

⁵⁴ interview with Keith Robbins 7 August 2010

a Jewish immigrant from Germany just before the Second World War, and noted that his position partly outside English society led him to a very particular view of the English.⁵⁵

Black has not held academic positions outside England. Strong and Lee both have unusual backgrounds for historians of Britain. Strong is primarily an art historian and gallery director; very much in the public eye, perhaps his position gave him some insight into what the public might find attractive in reading their national history. Lee, as he told *History Today* in 2004, owed his interest in history to an inspiring teacher at school rather than a university education. Travel made him realise that the empire was fading and Britain becoming a different sort of country.⁵⁶ Hibbert, who made his living from writing historical books, was another writer with a gift for producing what the public wanted to read.⁵⁷

History in the 1990s continued to be produced by professional historians some of whom wished to write for the public. Their work raised interesting questions about the nature of Britishness and whether it was useful to reconfigure national history along the lines suggested by Pocock. Writers from other backgrounds ignored the 'new British history' and wrote their own versions, two of which (those of Strong and Lee) were popular with the public and highly successful. Reviews by professional historians considered these works not good history, being full of egregious errors and written in an unscholarly style. But, as Simon Schama, himself a professional historian writing for a popular readership, commented, 'The massive audience for radio readings from *This Sceptred Isle*, based largely on unreconstructed readings from Churchill's history, testifies to the continuing capacity of his text to feed the popular hunger for heroic narrative.'⁵⁸ This partly explains the appeal of these histories.

Reviews and receptions

Many of the reviews of works in the four nations history category note that it is difficult history to write. Reviewers were impressed with Kearney's book. His concept of culture-based rather than nation-based history was thought the most significant aspect of his approach, but not a wholly successful one. Steven Ellis in *History Today* called the book 'perceptive, challenging

⁵⁵ Geoffrey Elton, ODNB

⁵⁶ *History Today* September 2004 vol 54, 62-63

⁵⁷ Christopher Hibbert, ODNB

⁵⁸ Simon Schama, *The History of Britain* volume 1 (BBC Worldwide, 2000) 15

and at times provocative' whose scope had 'subtlety and complexity'.⁵⁹ More complexity, noted Colin Welch, while perhaps being truer to reality, did not make for greater clarity. Eliminating concepts of class and nation made it hard for readers to get a picture of the past.⁶⁰ Richard S. Thompson in *Albion* thought it had problems: it led to major omissions from the discussion of the political history of Britain (the development of parliament for instance). Framing the discussion of the nineteenth century Irish, Scots and Welsh in terms of ethnic politics rather than nationalism was not a clearly superior approach. As Ellis noted also, the concept of culture as a category of analysis was less useful when writing about more recent periods. Kearney reverted to discussing nations separately although claiming their cultures were similar.⁶¹

Because Geoffrey Elton was so well known, his book on *The English* was extensively reviewed, both in the broadsheets and in academic journals. Perry Anderson in *The Guardian* considered it partly a conventional history of England, partly a brief reflection on Victorians and partly an argument about national identity. Elton wrote 'history from above with a vengeance', presenting readers with 'a bouquet of his passions and phobias'.⁶² The main issue posed by this book, according to Maurice Cowling, was whether "the ultimate truth of the English people's existence" still lies in a "mixture of order enforced by authority with freedom exercised under authority". The transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which Elton deprecated, had probably cut the English off from their past.⁶³ Some reviewers considered that *The English* was largely a conventional Anglo-centric history.⁶⁴ Other Eltonian features included his construction of the continuities in English history as residing in the law and the monarchy, rendering the people almost homogeneous, so that there were no apparent regional or class divisions.⁶⁵ Most reviewers noted Elton's continuing concentration on what he saw as the crucial role of Thomas Cromwell in creating the English nation-state.

Elton's work was accorded the distinction of longer consideration by three historians, Patrick Wormald, John Gillingham and Colin Richmond, at University College London, in March 1996,

⁵⁹ Steven Ellis, 'E Pluribus Unum?' *History Today* August 1989, 59

⁶⁰ Colin Welch, 'The chaos beneath the myth' *The Spectator* 1 April 1989, 27

⁶¹ Ellis; Richard S. Thompson, review in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, vol 22, no 2 (Summer, 1990) 289-290

⁶² Perry Anderson, *The Guardian* 12 January 1993

⁶³ Maurice Cowling, *The Times* 19 November 1992

⁶⁴ Paul R. Hyams, review in *Albion* vol 26 no 2 (Summer 1994) 309; Perry Anderson, review in *Guardian*, 12 January 1993

⁶⁵ Keith Robbins review of Elton in *The English Historical Review*, vol 111, no 440 (February 1996), 135; Gerald Newman, *Journal of British Studies* vol 35 no 1 (January 1996) 121

published in *TRHS*.⁶⁶ They identified various Eltonian characteristics, some of which they applauded, and some of which they criticised. Both Wormald and Gillingham deprecated Elton's identification of 'civilisation with ordered, and even bureaucratic, government', which Wormald called 'the Eltonian heresy'. Richmond asked: given Elton's Jewish background, how could he have continued to believe in the beneficence of strong government, and where are the Jews in his history? Elton seemed to assume that English government was generally beneficial, but does not discuss for whom. Both Wormald and Gillingham noted that Elton was aware that some might think his book 'an unduly favourable picture of the English'. But they noted that Elton admitted that the book was 'in a way' an attempt to 'pay a debt of gratitude', written after 'careful reflection' and having 'tried to acquaint myself with the present state of knowledge'.⁶⁷

The work of two other professional historians, Black and Robbins, received less critical attention in the more popular press. Reviewers thought that Robbins' book was 'a masterly reflective narrative' that made a fine attempt to solve the problem of how to write about Britain rather than England.⁶⁸ It was regarded as wide-ranging, including discussing the extent to which an imperial identity was also a British identity. The role of religion in the construction of a British identity was thought to be well handled.⁶⁹ However, they found difficulties with the approach. Robbins' top-down approach led to little or no discussion of many social and economic aspects, some of which were significant in the formation of Britishness, noted Black, Ellis and Cunningham.⁷⁰ A further difficulty, inherent some thought in the nature of the topic, was Robbins' view of the importance of the *English* parliament and monarchy in constructing the nation, preventing his keeping a focus on Britain. Reviewers noted too the limited treatment of Ireland. This was because the publishers intended another volume in the series to deal with the history of Ireland, prompting comment that it was not only historians who need to reconsider which countries to write about but also publishers.⁷¹

Reviewers approved of the attempt to include English, Scottish, Welsh and some Irish history but Jeremy Black's version of British history was only partially successful. Sheldon Hanft in *Albion* considered that Black's history gave 'a sense of the reciprocal influences the different

⁶⁶ Patrick Wormald, John Gillingham, Colin Richmond, 'Elton on "The English:" A Discussion', *TRHS* Sixth Series vol 7 (1997) 317-336

⁶⁷ Elton, *The English*, xii

⁶⁸ Tony Claydon, review in *Historical Journal* vol 42 no 2 (June 1998) 585; John S Ellis, review in *Albion* vol 30 no 4 (winter 1998) 656-57; Hugh Cunningham, review in *EHR* vol 114 no 456 (April 1999) 524-25

⁶⁹ Black, Claydon

⁷⁰ Jeremy Black, review in *History* January 1999, 119

⁷¹ Ellis, 657

nations of Great Britain exerted on each other', but other reviewers found his version less successful.⁷² Treating 'the histories of the four nations for the most part separately, it perpetuates the stereotype of the three non-English nations as satellite kingdoms, provinces, or internal colonies... [resulting in] a book that focuses primarily on the hegemonic English center'.⁷³ A further disadvantage, pointed out by Harvie, was 'Black's almost mathematical formula... that... precludes him from analysing the glue – two-party politics, economic relationships, imperial partnerships – that held industrial Britain together'.⁷⁴ In general, reviewers considered Black's parallel narrative structure hindered a full account of reciprocal histories. However, as we have seen, Black himself did not intend this *History of the British Isles* as a history in the four nations genre but as a narrative reasserting England's central position in the context of British history.⁷⁵

Works by non-professional historians are generally less well regarded by professional reviewers. Strong's *The Story of Britain* divided reviewers: professional historians on the whole hated it while general readers loved it. Both style and content stimulated divided reactions. As John Walsh wrote in *The Independent* (7 September 1996), 'to academic historians he is at best a populist, at worst a charlatan'. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto in *The Independent* gave it a scathing review, calling it 'infantile, episodic and starry eyed'.⁷⁶ Linda Colley however, found that 'His narrative steams along, his judgments are sharp and generally fair, and...there are copious illustrations', even if 'the result is sometimes reminiscent of *1066 And All That*'.⁷⁷ The traditional narrative appealed to some reviewers, including Charles Saumarez-Smith, whose experience at the National Portrait Gallery persuaded him that such history helped satisfy public demand for historical information similar to that written by Strong.⁷⁸ Robert Blake, reviewing *The Story of Britain*, thought it useful to compare it with *The Oxford Illustrated History* edited by Kenneth Morgan (published 1984, revised 1992) on the grounds that Morgan's had been 'the last effort of any consequence' to write a history of Britain for contemporary readers that took account of new scholarship. Blake praised the illustrations, entitling his review 'A Painterly Vision' as befits the author who was an art critic and former director of the V&A and the National Portrait Gallery. Reproductions of stamps,

⁷² Sheldon Hanft, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Winter, 1997) 644

⁷³ Brian P Levack, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Winter, 1998) 1190

⁷⁴ Christopher Harvie, *New Statesman* 20 September 1996

⁷⁵ Interview with Jeremy Black 10 September 2010

⁷⁶ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, 'The Dr Who history of Britain', *The Independent* 28 September 1996

⁷⁷ Linda Colley, *The Times* 12 September 1996

⁷⁸ Charles Saumarez-Smith, *Observer* 29 September 1996

contemporary photographs, drawings, cartoons, and a few artefacts and buildings – far fewer of the latter than in Hibbert – complemented the narrative.⁷⁹

Felipe Fernandez-Armesto castigated also Strong's clichéd style, noting for instance the comments that 'in the late fourteenth century things were changing due to the Black Death' (p 109) and that the policy of cutting government expenditure to get out of the slump 'actually did not square' (p 483).⁸⁰ Terry Eagleton also thought Strong's style poor. He called it a 'Ladybird style, rich in emulsive banalities'.⁸¹ However, Blair Worden in *The Spectator* found the style 'lucid and lively', and the *Library Journal* thought it 'well-written'. Strong himself disparaged the style of authors of much of the secondary literature he had read, declaring they had 'no idea how to hold the reader', whereas he felt that he 'always had an image in mind's eye to fire up the imagination'. Strong is proud of his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He claimed that 100,000 copies were sold by Christmas of the year of publication (1996) and that he wrote it for 14-16 year olds but that everybody, including taxi-drivers, was reading it.⁸²

This Sceptred Isle divided reviewers along the same lines. Fernandez-Armesto was no kinder to Lee's work than he had been to Strong's. In his view it '...represents everything that is most tawdry and trashy in media-history: old-fashioned, mythopoeic, technically uninventive, historically unchallenging, intellectually complacent, with a title that owes more to Tory conference speeches than to Shakespeare'.⁸³ But again, the work had wide appeal, attracting thousands of listeners and sales of the boxed set of around 150,000 by 1996.⁸⁴ A second series taking the account into the twentieth century was also popular.

Jeremy Black reviewed Christopher Hibbert's work together with Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* in *The Times* under the title 'Nations built on bricks and mortar', in a reference to Hibbert's concentration on architecture.⁸⁵ Black praised the work as 'clear' noting its 'striking character sketches, a shrewd balance of political and socio-economic developments and some interesting material on cultural, especially architectural, aspects', and

⁷⁹ Robert Blake, *Sunday Times* 8 November 1996

⁸⁰ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, 'The Dr Who history of Britain', *The Independent* 28 September 1996

⁸¹ Terry Eagleton, 'Roy Strong' in *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and others* (Verso 2005) 270

⁸² Interview with Sir Roy Strong 1 September 2010

⁸³ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Sunday Times* 31 October 1999

⁸⁴ Rachel Redford, *Daily Telegraph* 30 November 1996

⁸⁵ Jeremy Black, 'Nations built on bricks and mortar' *The Times* 5 September 1992

also the continuing appeal of the nation state in contemporary life, and by implication, its continuing significance for the way history is written.

Welsh's *The Four Nations* was reviewed by Paul Walsh in *The Canadian Journal of History* in December 2004, an indication of the appeal of histories of Britain in former colonies. He praised Welsh's clear, succinct narrative style but would have liked a little more analysis and interpretation. 'Welsh's narrative is, therefore, one of dramatic adjustment in the relationships between the four nations' he noted, and which encouraged a history of difference rather than similarity. For Ward, Welsh's biggest omission was his lack of discussion of immigration so that adaptation to new cultures and the development of new identities is not covered.⁸⁶

Conclusion

By the end of the century, historians recognised that a new approach to the national history of England/Britain had arrived. Encouraged by growing national awareness in Scotland and Wales and by Britain's membership of the EEC, historians began to rethink the narrative of national development. Ideas about situating the history of England within a Britannic context, paying attention to the interactions of England, Scotland, Wales and (to some extent) Ireland, stimulated much academic debate. There was more critical comment on this historiography than attempts to write such histories. Whether historians use a conventional national approach, writing the separate histories of England, Scotland, Wales or Ireland, or adopt a Britannic, four nations structure, each has its own problems of conceptualisation and narrative linkages.

Those who advocated the 'new' British history did so on four main grounds. First, that this perspective creates a fresh view, enabling a greater understanding of events in national history. As Kearney points out, and J M Roberts concedes, no national interpretation can be self-contained; events in one of the four countries often influenced events in another. Without this wider context, our understanding is diminished.⁸⁷ Some happenings are not specific to England, or to Scotland, Wales or Ireland, and we grasp their significance much better by seeing them as processes that were experienced throughout the British Isles in diverse ways.⁸⁸ Next, a Britannic perspective helps us to understand our complex and plural identities. Cohen and Kearney understand Britishness as an overarching affiliation, acting as an umbrella for our

⁸⁶ Paul Ward, review in *Canadian Journal of History* vol 39 no 3 (December 2004), 652

⁸⁷ Kearney, 1, 3; J M Roberts, General Editor's Preface to *New Oxford History of England*

⁸⁸ Kearney, 4

multi-layered identity.⁸⁹ Surveys that ask people whether they identify more as British or as English, Scottish or Welsh show that they make different choices even though living in the same place. These choices are very personal, but they are based on real experiences and feelings about these identities, not chosen at random, nor selected outside the nationalities offered by the survey.⁹⁰ In the 1990s, the future of the United Kingdom was a live political issue as campaigning for devolution in Scotland and Wales increased. The origins of the UK were thus interesting and important.⁹¹ Third, the 'new British history' challenged older teleologies about national development. Both Black and Kearney argued that four nations history is a useful corrective to an inaccurate account of the emergence of England and Britain. Black claims that questioning the relationship between the constituent parts of Britain reveals the contingent nature of relations and undermines ideas of teleology.⁹² Raphael Samuel also noted that examining the relationships between the constituent parts of Britain forces a new awareness that different events took place at the same time in the four nations. England is not the only place that matters.⁹³ Lastly, writing four nations history involves learning more about Scotland, Wales and Ireland and, at least for some periods, enables comparative work to be done, as Canny notes.⁹⁴ It also means that events in one country that do not necessarily seem unusual from the perspective of that country alone, may come to be seen as events that do require explanation.⁹⁵

However, much British history is still written from nation-centred approaches. This has its advantages too, while four nations history has corresponding disadvantages. Perhaps one of the most significant criticisms is that four nations history ascribes a spurious unity to Britain and Ireland.⁹⁶ While England sought hegemony over Ireland from the twelfth century, the two countries were politically united for only 120 years, after which only Northern Ireland was included in the United Kingdom. To treat the history of these two countries, together with those of Scotland and Wales, as the history of a coherent entity throughout the past two

⁸⁹ Robin Cohen, review article 'The Incredible Vagueness of Being British/English' *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) vol 76 no 3 (July 2000) 582; Kearney, 'Thatcher's Britain: Four Nations or One?' in *Ireland: Contested Ideas of Nationalism and History* (New York University Press, New York, 2007) 150

⁹⁰ British Social Attitudes Survey, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, Wales Life and Times Survey 2003 <http://www.devolution.ac.uk/Final%20Conf/Devolution%20public%20attitudes.pdf> [accessed 12 September 2010]

⁹¹ Alexander Grant and Keith J Stringer, 'Introduction: The enigma of British History' in ed idem *Uniting the Kingdom: The making of British History* (Routledge 1995) 5-6

⁹² Black, xi

⁹³ Samuel, *HWJ* No 40 (Autumn 1995) x, xi; Davies, 22

⁹⁴ Nicholas Canny, 'Writing Early Modern History: Ireland, Britain and the Wider World' in *The Historical Journal* vol 46 no 3 (Sep 2003) 737

⁹⁵ R R Davies, 17-18

⁹⁶ R R Davies, 10

thousand years is anachronistic. So is writing about England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland throughout the same period as if they were equivalent to the entities they are today. How can we write a single narrative of the British Isles when at least some Irish people rejected the British state? Historians usually construct the nation to exclude Ireland, although Frank Welsh's nation is dominated by Ireland in the nineteenth century. Elton, Black and Robbins all wrote histories for series that produced separate volumes on Ireland. Where they include it, historians covering the period 1801-1922 still usually treat Ireland separately, although Ireland for that period was fully politically part of the UK.⁹⁷

The issue for all the writers of New British History of what to call the entity whose history they were writing demonstrates the problematic position of Ireland within this historiography. The name 'British Isles' was widely used but also widely criticised. Canny observes that 'British Isles' is a solecism, the use of which alienated the Irish audience that practitioners of New British History should have been influencing.⁹⁸ Kearney's book uses the term 'British Isles' in the title of his book without apology or explanation. Writing in 2004 however, he noted that this term should always be used with quotation marks. In the same article he used 'Four Nations History' frequently as a descriptor.⁹⁹ Pocock proposed 'the Atlantic archipelago' because 'the term "British Isles" is one which Irishmen reject and Englishmen decline to take quite seriously'.¹⁰⁰ Norman Davies's solution was *The Isles*, having rejected 'The British and Irish Isles', 'Europe's Offshore Islands' or 'The Anglo-Celtic Archipelago'.¹⁰¹ However, Kearney remarked that 'Among "four nations" historians much ingenuity has been spent upon devising an alternative concept to "the British Isles"' whereas it was the historical interpretations lying behind such an approach that were important.¹⁰² The issue of nomenclature is one that it is impossible to resolve satisfactorily and this reflects the way the linkages, both political and cultural, have shifted over time between the various parts of what is now the UK and Ireland or Eire.

There is no need to choose between nation-based history and history from a wider Britannic perspective. It is important to guard against 'subsuming all historiographies within a unitary

⁹⁷ Paul O'Leary, 'Historians and the "new British History' in *Making History: an Introduction to the history and practices of a discipline*, ed Peter Lambert and Phillip Schofield (Routledge 2004) 219

⁹⁸ Canny, 738

⁹⁹ Kearney, 'Four Nations History in Perspective' (2004) in *Ireland: Contested Ideas of Nationalism and History* (New York University Press, New York 2007), 153-162

¹⁰⁰ Pocock, *A Plea for a New Subject*, 606

¹⁰¹ Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History* (Papermac 2000), xxiv

¹⁰² Hugh Kearney, review of *Conquest and Union: Fashioning a British State, 1485-1728*, eds Steven Ellis and Sarah Barber in *Albion* vol 28 no 2, (Summer 1996) 296

all-Britain model', or 'neglecting our plural identities in favour of one "principal" identity'.¹⁰³ As Richard Thompson wrote, the purpose of four nations history is not to supplant but to 'combine, correct and supplement' national surveys.¹⁰⁴ Ellis and Barber echo this view, pointing out that ideally new British history should complement nationalist history which examines individual characteristics, whereas the former looks at common traditions and experiences.¹⁰⁵ A comprehensive British history needs to consider not only the way a British identity was created but also the way other national identities have persisted.¹⁰⁶ Even though writing British national history with a four nations approach has not been as widely practised as Pocock might have hoped, no historian in the 21st century unthinkingly uses England to stand for Britain as was common earlier. Two very popular and firmly Anglo-centric histories, Strong's *Story* and Lee's *This Sceptred Isle*, were almost universally condemned by professional historians, thus showing the gap between popular and professional perceptions of history. If the professionals wanted to educate the public, they would need to work much harder to appeal to them. At the turn of the century, Simon Schama did just that, in his book and TV series significantly called *A History of Britain*.

¹⁰³ R R Davies, 23; Amartya Sen quoted in Colley, preface to 2nd ed of *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (Pimlico 2002) xvii

¹⁰⁴ Richard S Thompson, 5

¹⁰⁵ *Conquest and Union: Fashioning a British State, 1485-1728*, eds Steven Ellis and Sarah Barber, (Longman 1995) 7

¹⁰⁶ O'Leary, 221

CHAPTER 9 DAVIES AND SCHAMA: HISTORY FOR THE NEW CENTURY

- 2000 Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History* Papermac 2000
2000- Simon Schama, *A History of Britain* BBC Worldwide Ltd
2002 volume 1 *At the Edge of the World: 3000BC – AD 1603*
volume 2 *The British Wars 1603-1776*
volume 3 *The Fate of Empire 1776-2000*

Although Davies's *The Isles* and Schama's *A History of Britain* were both written to mark the millennium, and were both comprehensive synoptic histories of the nation, much divided them. Davies's was a clear story about state formation, about how the present political state came to be structured and what he thought was wrong with the way this story was usually told. Schama had no overall thesis, but recommended an alternative approach to the outdated Whig or Marxist interpretations. He wanted to demonstrate that British history was contingent rather than an inevitable process; that it was possible to see alteration, not continuity, as the norm; that the construction of Great Britain was one epoch among many, not an inevitable consummation of past events, and that national identity was fluid.¹ Although Davies's book attracted considerable comment in the quality press and led to interviews with John Tusa on Radio 3 and in *The Independent*, Schama's *A History of Britain* clearly had a bigger impact on the public, due to being both a television series and a (long) book. As this thesis looks at the presentation of national history to the public, Schama's wider exposure justifies longer discussion. Both books were widely disseminated, including audio and print versions.²

¹ Simon Schama, *A History of Britain* volume 1 (BBC Worldwide Ltd 2000), 16-17

² Publishing histories:

Norman Davies *The Isles*

Published by Macmillan in 1999 Hardback; also published in USA
Reissue 2000
Paperback 2000 (corrected edition) Papermac
In USA 2000, 2001
Audio CD 2004 November

Simon Schama *A History of Britain*

Published by BBC Books in 3 vols, hardback, 2000-2002
Audio CD edition August 2003 (abridged)
Paperback all vols May 2003
Paperback all vols November 2009
Large print edition by BBC Audio Books 2004

Context

The cultural context in which these books appeared was one of increasing popular interest in history and decreasing certainty about the identity of Britain. Longer-established trends, including a better educated, more discerning and more demanding reading public, easier and cheaper book publishing and continuing interest in stories, contributed to a climate of opinion welcoming history. The 1990s saw many historians writing more explicitly for the general reader. Sales of 'big books' on important themes such as Empire (Niall Ferguson), major battles of the Second World War (Antony Beevor), and post war Europe (Tony Judt), were large. In his introduction to a book arising from a conference on History and the Media, David Cannadine suggested other reasons why there seemed to be a history 'boom'. He noted that the new Labour government rebranding the nation as 'new' made the past seem more interesting; the end of the British empire in Hong Kong, the death of the Queen Mother and the Golden Jubilee of the Queen prompted retrospection, and the presence of more history graduates created a greater demand for all types of history. The result of the limited time given to history in school was that most people now got their historical education from film and TV, or from the internet.³ It may also be that the limited time makes some more interested in and curious about history and less likely to be discouraged.

Both Norman Davies and Simon Schama wrote histories that consciously responded to contemporary concerns. The nature of the United Kingdom as a multi-national united state seemed to be in question; the breakup of the United Kingdom was discussed, some looking forward to it, some regretting it. Linda Colley's *Britons*, appearing in the early 1990s, was the most extended and prominent consideration of how the union came about. Devolution became a reality in 1999 with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. Was Britain just a constructed nation? Was Britishness an inherent identity? The government campaigned for 'British values' although no one could satisfactorily identify them. Immigration helped to create a multi-cultural nation and at the same time created political concern about its impact. How to include those whose ethnicity and culture had their origins in non-British, non-European cultures and places was a particular issue.

Concerns about whether the Union was about to disintegrate encouraged in some circles a sense of crisis of identity, which was exacerbated by enduring ambivalence about the nature of the links with Europe, for example whether Britain should join the euro. A perennial

³ David Cannadine, 'Introduction', 1 in *History and the Media*, ed idem (Palgrave Macmillan 2004)

alternative was to forge closer links with the USA. The British government drew closer to America after the attacks of 11 September 2001 when the UK immediately supported the US in its response to the attacks, distancing itself from European nations, particularly France, which were more opposed to war.

Two influences propelled Davies to write his history of Britain. The first was his experience of working on European, particularly east European, history and then writing a history of Europe. In that book he tried to write a 'total history', including countries that were often overlooked, and thought it useful to try to apply that method to the history of Britain since, as he explained, 'Having spent several decades writing about foreign places, I wished to embark for once on an adventure round my native shores.'⁴ The second influence on his decision was, as he told John Tusa, that he had 'developed a certain dissatisfaction with the subject through being a Professor at London University. For example, sitting on the examination board and seeing colleagues preparing questions on British History, in which there would not be a single question about Scotland or Wales. Four hundred questions on British history of which 399 were about England. So that's probably what got under my skin in the first place.'⁵

Schama's book resulted from a BBC commission. As the millennium approached, the BBC needed to consider what interpretation of the date's significance to offer the nation and how to mark it in a manner appropriate for the national broadcaster. Its intentions were expressed in its millennium slogan: 'Reflect, celebrate, anticipate'.⁶ According to its press release, it decided on 'The first televised history of Britain, chronicling events since the Roman invasion' as the centrepiece of its millennium celebrations. Miri Rubin described how she and other historians were invited to a lunch with BBC executives to discuss how the BBC might go about making this history.⁷ In the event, the BBC approached another historian, Simon Schama. I have found no information on why the BBC chose Schama, who had not worked on British but on Dutch seventeenth century history. In 1995, Schama was contacted by Janice Hadlow and Michael Jackson of the BBC about writing and producing 'an unapologetically sweeping multi-part series on the history of Britain, meant to reach from the Romans to the twentieth century'.⁸ Schama's *A History of Britain* was an 'ambitious series which analyse[d] the bigger picture'. With other historical programmes made at this time, *A History of Britain* was designed

⁴ Interview with Norman Davies 21 February 2011; *The Isles*, xli

⁵ Norman Davies interviewed by John Tusa in *The Independent* 1 October 2000

⁶ Mike Greenwood, 'Showing on a Screen Near You: BBC's History 2000' *History Today* (February 2000), 3

⁷ Miri Rubin, 'The BBC's *A History of Britain*' *AHR Forum* vol 114 no 3 June 2009, 664

⁸ Simon Schama, 'Fine-Cutting Clio' *The Public Historian* vol 25 no 3 (summer 2003), 17

to be complemented by online resources and links to relevant organisations.⁹ Clearly the BBC thought it appropriate to look back at the nation's past when marking an epoch-making date in the nation's history.

Authors' intentions

Davies made plain from the outset that he was writing a history of 'these islands', emphasising his view that the remit of English or British history and the very definition of Britain was very muddled.¹⁰ He did not intend to 'summarise the reigning consensus' but to look again at the overall framework of our national history which had been based on the assumption that 'England is the only part of the Isles that counts and that British history is a mere continuation of English history.'¹¹ He was clear that although the old-fashioned approach to teaching national history consisting of a clear chronology of monarchs and battles had now passed, 'it has never found a worthwhile replacement'.¹² He believed that the society was unaware of its history, shown by the confusion surrounding the meanings of 'England' and 'Britain', or 'Great Britain' and 'the United Kingdom'. This confusion existed even in the minds of 'prominent authorities': other historians, dictionaries, library classifications, government documentation when naming currency and international driving licence plates. Davies intended to correct the conventional but in his view misleading account. He identified his goals as to:

- Suggest the conventional framework of the history of the Isles urgently needs revision
- Pay respect to all nations and cultures of the Isles
- Put existing knowledge of the topic in a firm chronological and analytical setting
- Contribute to the Britishness debate
- Present 'a clear and simple exposition of the overall historical narrative, concentrating on the formation and transformation of the states within whose fluctuating bounds every layer of our shifting and multiple identities has been formed'¹³

Davies has said that he never had a limited view of his readership; he aimed to write to be readable by as wide a spectrum of people as possible.¹⁴ In his BBC Radio 3 interview with John Tusa he stated that 'a gold miner in Australia saying he's picked up my history of Europe and

⁹ Mike Greenwood, 'Showing on a Screen Near You: BBC's History 2000', *History Today* February 2000

¹⁰ Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History* (Papermac 2000), xxiii

¹¹ Davies, xxxiii

¹² Davies, xxxvi

¹³ Davies, xxxix

¹⁴ Interview with Norman Davies 21 February 2011

now he's thoroughly enjoying it' would be an ideal reader.¹⁵ He did not see a necessary division between academic and general history.¹⁶ 'The great mass audience of educated people who these days have a great hunger for history, they've been denied historical narrative in the last generation to a much greater extent than previous generations...my books... don't require any specialist qualifications to sit down and read them.'¹⁷

To introduce his view of how British history should be written, Schama's preface discussed types of British history in the second half of the twentieth century. He noted William McElwee's view in the 1950s that, 'under British leadership' it was still possible to anticipate 'the peaceful evolution of backward races throughout the Empire'.¹⁸ In his view the theme of British history seen from the twentieth century was endurance, or put another way, continuity. What makes public life and history different at the end of the twentieth century was the existence of television. Schama's was the first comprehensive national history to be made for television, with films and books both parts of a single production.¹⁹ In his view, both the coronation in 1953 and the funeral of Winston Churchill in 1965 were celebrations of national history as continuity. He contrasted this with a more radical, subversive view reflecting 'the bleaker and more contentious realities of past and present' in which Bryant's 'rustic rhapsody' was replaced by an emphasis on the drastic consequences faced by those who challenged 'the propertied despotism of the complacent squirearchy' that at school in the 1960s he and his contemporaries thought more appropriate.²⁰ But he believed that the romantic insular paean to British progress he found in Churchill's *History of the English-speaking Peoples* was not wholly without truth, especially for those who had lived during the Second World War.

Schama argued that neither version was suitable for the end of the century. Marxist history, the history of the working class and class conflict, did not speak to twenty-first century citizens; nor was the imperial triumphalist saga of earlier times suitable, although, as the popularity of *This Sceptred Isle* showed, it appealed to some who wanted their history nostalgic. He pointed out that both Macaulay and Churchill thought history should be 'a living instruction', required for informed citizens. They wrote the history of Britain as a history of insularity and particularism, showing how the past had led inevitably to the nation state of

¹⁵ Norman Davies interviewed by John Tusa in *The Independent* 1 October 2000

¹⁶ Interview with Norman Davies

¹⁷ Norman Davies interviewed by John Tusa BBC Radio 3 1 October 2000

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/davies_transcript.shtml

¹⁸ Simon Schama, *A History of Britain*, vol 1 (BBC Worldwide Ltd 2000) p 11; William McElwee, history teacher at Stowe School and author of *The story of England, from the time of King Alfred to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II*, Faber 1954

¹⁹ Simon Schama personal communication

²⁰ Schama, *A History of Britain*, vol 1, 14

Great Britain or the United Kingdom. This now seemed misleading, he believed, arguing that there were other ways to relate national history. We infer that this book is Schama's approach. Such a history would emphasise change and contingency, recognise that the present configuration of nations within the British state was conditional, and would appreciate the complexity of British history. And within that complexity, the wonderful stories that comprise our history should provide 'not just instruction but pleasure'.²¹

Main story

Davies

Davies' narrative had two strands: linking the history of England and Britain into the history of Europe, and telling the story of the creation of the various political states that had been established and modified in these islands over the course of its long history. The overarching theme of *The Isles* was the formation of the British state, the place now called The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Davies found the 'broad framework of British history' as normally presented to be extremely unsatisfactory in two ways. Firstly, it did not give sufficient attention to the interconnections of English and British history with the history of other European nations, from the earliest migrations of Celtic people to the Isles, to the nation's present half-hearted membership of the European Union.²² The other difficulty was that the interconnections of the histories of Scotland, Wales and Ireland with that of England were not usually covered. He contended that many citizens of the UK did not know its correct name or how it came to have its present structure. He wanted to end this confusion and to explain the origins of the British state accurately and accessibly.²³

Linkage of English with European history

The Isles followed Davies's *Europe: A History*. He wrote that he had 'planted a British strand' in that book and in consequence 'decided to plant a European strand in *The Isles*'.²⁴ A big part of his aim was to reconnect the history of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland with the history of the other nations of Europe, particularly those with which they were most closely connected: Scandinavia and France. To view English history as in some sense separate from European history was to misunderstand our past. He began and ended the book by discussing links to the continent: from the earliest physical connection before what became the English

²¹ Schama, vol 1, 15-17

²² Davies, xxv

²³ Davies, xxvi-xxviii

²⁴ Norman Davies, 'Not Forever England', in *Europe East and West* (Jonathan Cape 2006), 85

Channel was formed, to the Channel Tunnel that now physically reconnects Britain with France. His 'snapshots', introductory essays, all illustrated how British history was linked with that of Europe or the Empire. They covered such topics as the migration from the continent of Celtic peoples who then shared a culture over several regions; Norse sagas to show the Scandinavian connections, and the unfortunate expedition of the Scots to try to establish a trading post at Darien in Central America in 1698. These were chosen to emphasise the non-English context of key events in the national history. Davies emphasised that the separation of English or British history from European history was false: British history was part of European history. The history of this nation was not as unique as historians had suggested and some liked to suppose. Even cherished institutions like Parliament and the Church of England had continental equivalents, in Poland and Sweden.²⁵

Davies further emphasised the European aspects of English history, specifically the earlier Danish, Norman and French connections, in his use of the names by which the kings would have known themselves, such as Guillaume, Edouard, Henri. The 'native dynasties' were the Tudwrs and Stewarts. For most of the period 1066 to 1485 the monarchy was French not English. By adopting the form of nomenclature that would have been used at the time about which he was writing he illustrated how the culture of the past was different from that of the present, and pointed up what was English and what was not.

History of four nations

Turning to his second theme – the interconnectedness of the histories of the four nations – Davies covered events in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland in each chapter. He wanted to show how the four nations gradually built the links that brought increasing political unity, first in England, then in Scotland, later in Wales and Ireland and most recently in the union of Scotland with England. He showed how the whole of Ireland was for a time united with Great Britain. The amount of space given in each chapter to each country varies according to the importance Davies thought it had at the time in question.

The book was heavily weighted towards earlier periods. By recounting earlier history in some detail, Davies explained how the interactions of the various peoples who migrated to Britain for conquest, raiding or settlement shaped the political groupings that became England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The key to the emergence of Wales and Scotland was the failure of the Celtic inhabitants to mix with the Germanic newcomers. The Viking presence

²⁵ 'Not Forever England', 90

encouraged the formation of a group identity against the enemy. Traces of the Viking culture remained in place names in e.g. Orkney and Shetland. The expansion of Wessex that formed the core of the later English nation was not inevitable. What might have been in the eleventh century an Anglo-Danish empire never fulfilled its potential because it did not have time to consolidate: dynastic failure brought it to an early end. The arrival of the Normans brought French cultural dominance, and important political links of English kings with French politics, although England never became completely French.

The partial conquest of Ireland by Normans from England on behalf of Irish and Welsh lords, with John becoming king of England as well as lord of Ireland, began to bring Ireland within the English sphere of influence. The eventual loss of territories in France split the empire and focused attention in England. Edward I's assertion of hegemony over Scotland and Wales, both having identities clearly separate from that of England, led to conflicts. Davies showed that by the end of the thirteenth century each nation was clearly distinct, but England had firmly established its wish to dominate the Isles. England became disengaged from France following the Hundred Years' War, and the establishment of a royal house with no base beyond the Isles. English national identity, cultural as well as by allegiance, came into being through facing hostility in France and subsequently Spain. Eventually three Stuart kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland arose. Incorporation of Wales into England led, he thought, to a consequent loss of Welsh individuality.

A common Stuart dynasty in what Davies called the Anglo-Scottish isles encouraged the first stirrings of Britishness and advanced the use of the term 'British Isles'. But two isles and three kingdoms remained. The British Civil Wars resulted in a British republic but not thereafter in a British restored monarchy. After the Act of Union in 1707, the new parliament of Great Britain assembled. The state of Great Britain was born, marking the beginning of modern British history. The union of Scotland and England made Britain. Ireland was not an essential part of this. Ireland did however become part of the Union in 1801 when all the Isles came under one united British rule. After 1922, the island of Ireland was left in an unusual, confused constitutional situation that remains exceptional. The British state depended on key institutions, including the navy, Protestantism, the monarchy, parliament, the Empire. These supported and advanced Britain in the nineteenth century, but by around 1900 they were all in decline, and weakened thereafter. Davies concluded that by the end of the twentieth century, the British state was unlikely to continue in its present form – indeed he predicted its

imminent demise.²⁶ It would be truer to Britain's earlier decisions to engage itself in European affairs he believed, if it aligned itself more completely with its European partners.

Schama

According to Schama, the format for *A History of Britain* was considered by the broadcasting industry consensus 'to be an obsolete genre: author-driven, on-camera, single-presenter history, frankly interpretative, with no other talking heads to interrupt the flow of story and argument...History still held... [an] important place in the schedules, but...industry wisdom held that only archaeology in exotic locations and twentieth-century histories using stock archive footage had any chance of clocking serious ratings'.²⁷ Schama did not focus so exclusively on state building as Davies, but he did concern himself with the domination of Scotland, Wales and Ireland by England. His approach was as a storyteller, but of stories with an argument. However, in 21 chapters of the book and fifteen films, it is hard to identify an overall theme. It is a series of stories, not a connected argument. His approach was to concentrate on one episode, and tell it in detail to convey wider themes and ideas. He often began with a vignette and then discussed broader issues. For example in volume 3 Chapter 3 'The Queen and the Hive', Schama opened with an account of Queen Victoria visiting the Great Exhibition then moved on to a discussion of the impact of industrialisation and technological development. He used biographies and compelling detail to tell a story that swept the audience along, showing what it was like to be there. But there was little grounding in economic and social issues. Schama's account was episodic and personal, even idiosyncratic, for example in his choice in the last programme to tell the story of the twentieth century through the lives of Churchill and Orwell. One reviewer identified five themes in Schama's history:

1. Subordination of church to crown
2. Subordination of crown to the law
3. Chronic tension between liberty and obedience
4. Efforts of English to dominate other peoples in British Isles
5. Transformation of empire of commerce and freedom to empire based on authority and coercion.²⁸

Linking these ideas was that of freedom: the right of some institutions to constrain others and on what basis; the right of institutions to constrain individuals. In this sense this was traditional history.

²⁶ Davies, 881

²⁷ Simon Schama, 'Fine-Cutting Clio' *The Public Historian* vol 25 no 3 (Summer 2003), 16

²⁸ Philip Harling, review in *The Public Historian* vol 26 no 2 (Spring 2004), 127

Crown and church

The subordination of the church to the crown was exemplified by the conflict between Henry II and Becket. Unlike Davies, who believed, in line with his overall viewpoint, that the struggle 'must be seen in the context of strains between Church and state not just in England but right across Western Europe', Schama recounted the conflict principally in terms of what he believes the main protagonists wanted, as a quarrel between individuals.²⁹ He gave a couple of paragraphs to explaining the broader dispute, but eleven pages to the Henry / Becket relationship. However, his comment on what was at stake and the effect of the murder placed this episode within a long-running theme in English history. He argued that Becket's idea that 'the Church could, in the last resort, lay down the law to the state' survived until the Reformation.³⁰ The Reformation, too, was examined mainly in terms of individuals: Anne Boleyn as 'both the occasion and cause of the extraordinary change in direction'; Wolsey, Henry, Catherine, Cranmer and Cromwell as elite individuals who were portrayed as the significant players in the Reformation.³¹ The growth of Protestant thought and the vernacular Bible were mentioned, but only as background to the actions of key individuals which alone in England drove the rejection of papal authority and the creation of a national Protestant church. In this conflict, the state got the upper hand, although not without opposition, which led to persecution of those holding beliefs out of favour with the monarch.

In the account of the Civil Wars, Schama was clear that the flashpoint was the attempt by Charles I to impose the Anglican Prayer Book on the Scots, that is, to enforce the will of the monarch on the Church just as Henry had tried with Becket. The chapter dealing with this was called 'Give Caesar His Due?' indicating that one of the important issues at stake was the extent to which the secular power controlled the ecclesiastical. The other was the extent to which the people would accept rule based on a claim to divine right, imposed by armed force. Schama argued that resolution to the conflict would come only when 'a monarch of both England and Scotland would manage to square the circle, and see that the authority of the Crown might actually be strengthened not compromised by parliamentary partnership'.³²

Crown and law

A second sub-theme in Schama's work was the subordination of the crown to the law. Principally this was discussed in the sections on Magna Carta and the Civil Wars. Schama described Magna Carta as a method adopted by the barons to reduce the power of the

²⁹ Davies, 286

³⁰ *A History of Britain* Vol 1, 143

³¹ *A History of Britain* Vol 1, 293

³² *A History of Britain* Vol 1, 169

Angevin monarchy in England. They did this by listing actions forbidden to the king, thus protecting their own interests. Schama went on to claim that 'the law was not simply the will or the whim of the king but was an independent power in its own right, and that kings could be brought to book for violating it'.³³ The barons even tried to set up a body to monitor the king's compliance with the charter. Schama concluded that the idea of the charter presupposed that there existed 'some sort of English "state" of which the king was a part (albeit the supreme part) but not the whole'. The barons kept the idea of Magna Carta alive by reissuing it in later reigns and made the notion of a contract between king and people important in developing later constitutional ideas. Magna Carta was important in the parliamentary debates of the seventeenth century. As Davies explained, Magna Carta's meaning was developed into a myth about how the English common law had made England a haven of liberty for ordinary people compared to the autocratic despotisms of the European monarchies.³⁴ Schama argued that in spite of the execution of the king and the establishment of a military dictatorship over Great Britain and Ireland, the 1640s and 1650s did not amount to a revolution. There was no systematic programme of radical change, no plan for redirection of allegiance to new models, but a continued commitment to upholding traditional law and order.³⁵ Schama called his chapter on the Restoration and the Revolution of 1688 'Unfinished Business'. Until the flight of James II and the invasion of William, two conflicting views of political power contended for acceptance in England: divine right kingship and the mixed monarchy.³⁶ Schama argued that these were the issues at stake as James's and William's armies fought at the battle of the Boyne and so closed a chapter in the history of England, having resolved the question in favour of the crown being subject to the law.

Anglo-centric or four nations history?

Schama's history was not a history of England but of Britain. This title indicated that it would treat not just the events in England but also those in Scotland, Wales and Ireland and the relationship between the four nations. Unlike Davies, Schama expressed no concerns about using the names England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland to refer to parts of the country before these political entities came into being. Although Schama did not explicitly claim the formation of the British state from the four nations England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland as a theme, he stressed several connected aspects: the history of Britain was not one history leading inexorably to the 'unitary state of Great Britain'. Rather, the existence of Great Britain was just one epoch among many; national identity was not fixed but fluid, shifting with time and

³³ *A History of Britain* Vol 1, 161-62

³⁴ Davies, 327-28

³⁵ *A History of Britain* vol 2, 216-17

³⁶ *A History of Britain* vol 2, 295

allowing other identities to be important; divisions within were as important as divisions between Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and England, and the content of 'Britishness' was seen as muddled.³⁷

The four nations received some coverage in most chapters. They were particularly the centre of attention in the material on Edward I and his subjugation of Wales and Scotland, the account of the Civil Wars, and in the chapters covering the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when Ireland was emphasised. So although there was considerable coverage of the British Isles, Schama's viewpoint was Anglo-centric. He covered certain episodes at length rather than connecting and linking events in all four nations. The events still tended to be those that had an impact on England or on the UK as a whole, rather than being significant in their own terms. The narrative was more about parallel developments than interactions. Schama claimed that to discuss each country in detail for each period would lead to an artificial and interrupted narrative; it was better to focus on issues of particular importance to the whole.³⁸ He regarded England as of primary importance, and developments in England and English needs, as driving British history.

Empire

A further influence driving British history in Schama's view was the acquisition of Empire. His Empire was first in America, later in India, little in Africa or Australasia. He noted that it was not only in America but also in India that the British found themselves with the wrong kind of Empire, one of soldiers and slaves rather than trade.³⁹ He linked the discussion of America and India via an individual, Cornwallis, Governor-General of Bengal, commander at the British defeat at Yorktown in the American colonies. Schama commented that the same issues were at stake in the East Indies as in the West: whether liberty could flourish in an imperial setting. The British in India had intended to be traders, not conquerors, but it did not work out like that. It turned into a different kind of Empire.⁴⁰

Schama did not discuss in detail the settlement of North America but noted its largely Puritan origins (as far as immigrants from England and Scotland were concerned, although later in the 1750s there were Jacobite settlers).⁴¹ By the 1650s, a new Empire was being created, often by military aggression in the slaving islands of the Atlantic. 'The irony that an empire so noisily

³⁷ *A History of Britain* vol 1, 17

³⁸ Schama reply to Will Hutton *The Observer* 23 June 2002

³⁹ *A History of Britain* vol 2, 485

⁴⁰ *A History of Britain* vol 2, 481

⁴¹ *A History of Britain* vol 2, 102, 389

advertised as an empire of free Britons should depend on the most brutal coercion of enslaved Africans is not just an academic paradox. It was the *condition* of the empire's success, its original sin.' The cycle was supposed to work like this: the colonies, protected from enemies, would supply raw materials to England, which sent back manufactured goods. The colonial suppliers would make enough to afford these through a buoyant home market. The colonials would also invest in improving their plantations, producing more and more cheaply, making goods available to wider sections of society in England. '...an endlessly benevolent cycle of mutual improvement'. But by the end of the eighteenth century, the British Empire was not one of farmers and traders, but of soldiers and slaves. How had this happened, asked Schama. The first cause was tobacco growing, habit forming and labour intensive, then the production of coffee and tea, then the sugar which was thought necessary to make them palatable, which could grow well in the hot humid West Indian climate. It was grown there from 1655. The use of slave labour increased as white European and Native American labour was unwilling to work hard enough.⁴² The need for this labour led the English to participate in the slave trade more actively, although they had been involved since the early seventeenth century.

In the early eighteenth century, conflict with the French in North America for space and trade erupted into war, settled by the Treaty of Utrecht that awarded much new territory to Britain. By the 1760s, the British government, aware of the extent of their Empire, 'from Bengal to Senegal, from Minorca to Montreal', were increasingly worried about how to pay for its defence.⁴³ An obvious solution was to get settlers in America to pay for their own defence. British politicians imagined America was populated by English people, forgetting the large numbers of Dutch and German settlers as well as Scots and Irish. This misperception increased the misunderstanding between British rulers and the American settlers that led to the War of Independence.

The chapters discussing British rule in Ireland and India in the nineteenth century demonstrate where Schama's heart lay. In both these countries British rule contributed to the death toll from famine; government policy made a bad situation worse as officials hardened their hearts to human suffering in the name of economic theory. Charles Trevelyan, administrator in both Ireland and India, was influenced by Malthus. His understanding of the economic distress, in both countries, was that it was the necessary price to restructure their economies and societies along sounder lines. He, and many of his generation, believed that to interfere would delay the necessary changes which were for the long-term benefit of these countries. This

⁴² *A History of Britain* vol 2, 404-409

⁴³ *A History of Britain* vol 2, 454

understanding lay behind the reluctance to do anything significant to alleviate suffering and hunger. The legacy was not economic prosperity and a closer union of Ireland and England but a burning resentment that poisoned Anglo-Irish relations for more than a century. This account was in chapters headed 'The Empire of Good Intentions'; Schama's view was that the good intentions resulted in disaster.⁴⁴

Authors

Both Davies and Schama have some claim to be regarded as public intellectuals. Davies is less well known than Schama, although in 1999 Richard Morrison, cultural and music critic, called him 'the most discussed British historian of the 1990s'.⁴⁵ Davies, born in 1939, was at Magdalen College Oxford, where he was a pupil of A J P Taylor. A period in school teaching helped, he believed, to make his writing accessible.⁴⁶ He studied at several European universities after Oxford and Sussex, including Kraków, where his enthusiasm for Poland started. Most of his career was at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies as lecturer, reader and professor of Polish history 1969-96; he was visiting professor of Polish history at several US universities. He is a prolific, controversial historian. His work on British history was a departure from his usual field of interest, the history of Eastern Europe. He commented, 'I don't see how you can write history and hold strong and clear opinions about things without provoking controversy of one sort or the other... I think it's a sign of a successful history book if it does arouse controversy of an intelligent, critical sort.'⁴⁷ In this he echoed his teacher, A J P Taylor. His approach to big historical topics – the history of Europe, the history of Britain, the role of the Soviet Union in the Second World War – is revisionist.

Schama belongs to a later academic generation. He was born in 1945 and became one of a notable cohort of historians at Cambridge, students of Jack Plumb, including John Brewer, David Cannadine, Linda Colley and Roy Porter. He was a Fellow of Christ's College Cambridge for ten years, and was briefly at Oxford before he went to Harvard in 1980 and then to Columbia, New York. He has written widely on cultural history and the history of art as well as on more general historical topics such as the French Revolution. He has adopted new approaches, producing exciting narratives written in a vivid style clearly evoking atmosphere. Schama has moved since *A History of Britain* from being a public intellectual to being a

⁴⁴ *A History of Britain* vol 3, chapters 5 and 6

⁴⁵ Richard Morrison, 'Britain dies as Mr Tough rewrites the past' *The Times* 30 October 1999

⁴⁶ Interview, 21 February 2011

⁴⁷ Interview with John Tusa BBC Radio 3

celebrity whose views are sought on many, not necessarily historical, topics, such as his tastes in cooking and sport.

Reviews and receptions

Davies

Both books were reviewed extensively, largely in the broadsheets, with some comment in the historical journals. Both Davies and Schama gave interviews around the time the works appeared. In *The Isles* Davies challenged the conventional Anglo-centric viewpoint from which national history is most commonly narrated. Most of the reviews understood what he was trying to achieve although they did not all agree that it was the right approach. Historians who approved of the attempt thought Davies had succeeded: for Richard Jones it was a 'masterly overview of [the] present time', and for Roy Porter 'The Isles is a masterwork, particularly memorable for its concluding survey of the centrifugal forces in a late 20th-century Britain.'⁴⁸ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, who could be scathing, commented, 'At last we have a book about the English that hauls them out of isolation and puts them where they belong: alongside the Irish, Scots and Welsh and in the company of fellow-Europeans.'⁴⁹ Steven Ellis also thought Davies succeeded in his revisionist aim in that *The Isles* 'exposes and corrects earlier accounts'.⁵⁰ Journalists liked it on the whole. To Nigel Jones of *The Times* it was a 'determined attempt to airbrush England and Englishness out of the historical narrative'.⁵¹ Andy Beckett of *The Guardian*, who liked it on the whole, found that Davies 'occasionally gets carried away with enthusiasm for Celtic rebellions while being less interested in English revolts, e.g. Levellers and Chartists'.⁵²

One aspect that unsurprisingly caused criticism was the place names Davies invented for the early history of Britain, such as 'The Painted Isles' for Britain between 600 BC and 43 AD, and 'The Isles of *Outremer*' for Britain between 1154 and 1326. Some thought this 'accentuates the otherness and distance of the more remote past', while Lamar Hill found 'invented names laudable but distracting'.⁵³ Reviewers noted that Davies had written this book on the eve of the millennium and assessed how far it considered contemporary questions. For some

⁴⁸ T W Heyck, *The Historian*, vol 64 issue 1, Fall 2001, 174; Richard Jones *Virginia Quarterly Review* Summer 2001, 564; Roy Porter 'A nation of what, exactly?' *The Times* 11 November 1999

⁴⁹ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Sunday Times* 7 November 1999

⁵⁰ Steven G Ellis *Journal of Modern History* vol 47 no 4 (December 2002), 836

⁵¹ *The Times*, 23 December 1999

⁵² Andy Beckett, *The Guardian* 30 October 1999

⁵³ Richard Jones, 564; Lamar Hill, *Albion* vol 33 no 4 (Autumn 2001), 428-9

journalists it responded appropriately to current concerns being 'a key book for its time' (Young) and 'a timely and cunning reworking of our history' (Hitchens), while Andy Beckett felt that it was 'more a timely polemic than a lasting narrative'.⁵⁴ Most reviewers praised the style: the narrative was 'spirited' (Heyck), 'sustained [and] written in a witty, lively style' (Ellis), and had 'epic scope..., unflagging readability and trenchant conclusions'.⁵⁵ Two reviews by historians reflected the consensus: Keith Robbins found *The Isles* to be 'a challenging, stimulating and sometimes irritating volume', and Robert Pearce considered it 'a highly controversial blockbuster which not only looks at the past but examines current notions of national identity and looks ahead to likely future developments'.⁵⁶

Schama

Schama's television series and parallel books received responses in academic journals and web sites, as well as quality broadsheets and weeklies. A key aim of the series was to satisfy what the BBC believed to be 'a pent-up public demand for a single-voiced, chronologically ordered history on the grand scale', and, as Schama himself put it, to give 'millions of viewers a fresh encounter with their past'.⁵⁷ The reviews discussed two main aspects of his *History*: the content, and the general approach and style. Concerning each, some commentators thought Schama had succeeded brilliantly while others thought it was an opportunity missed. Many critics, including non-academics, drew attention to the 'focus on the big, familiar set-piece confrontations' that 'runs the risk of reducing the history of Britain to little more than a soap opera of bloodthirsty warring kings, jealous siblings and revolting barons'.⁵⁸ They regarded the approach as 'deeply conventional', and old-fashioned, and thought that Schama had promised 'a new approach to his subject, throwing off the Whiggish teleology' but had not delivered.⁵⁹ Considering the overall approach, journalist Will Hutton found the series lacking a coherent narrative, the programmes being linked 'not by some underpinning theory or logic, but by Simon's magic'.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Hugo Young, 'Little More than an Extension of France', *London Review of Books* vol 22 no 1, 6 January 2000; Peter Hitchens, 'The View From the Margins', *The National Interest*, Summer 2000; Andy Beckett, *The Guardian* 30 October 1999

⁵⁵ Heyck, 173; Ellis, 836; Richard Morrison, *The Times*, 30 October 1999

⁵⁶ Keith Robbins, Review of *The Isles: A History*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4133> Robert Pearce, *History Today* March 2000, 55

⁵⁷ Quoted in *American Historical Review* vol 114 no 3 June 2009 'AHR Forum', 695; Schama reply to Will Hutton, *The Observer* 23 June 2002

⁵⁸ Brian Appleyard, *Sunday Times* 1 October 2000; *The Economist* 28 September 2000

⁵⁹ David Aaronovitch, *The Independent* 11 October 2000; John Vincent, *The Times Literary Supplement* 24 November 2009

⁶⁰ Will Hutton, *The Observer*, 16 June 2002

Coverage of social history

Comment on the content focused on three aspects: coverage of social history, the place of 'great men' in history, and the extent to which Schama's Britain was English dominated. The emphasis on high politics, critics considered, led to some corresponding lack of material on the lives of ordinary people and on real legal and cultural differences between the nations. This made the history less appealing and relevant to the ordinary public. For example, historian Linda Levy Peck in the *AHR* observed that 'peoples and communities play a lesser role than the creation of institutions and the state in Schama's *A History of Britain*'; at least in the period 1500-1776, Schama's Britons 'are primarily kings, courtiers, nobility, gentry'.⁶¹ Jeremy Black deplored this omission, noting the limited space for non-political topics and the neglect of cultural life.⁶²

Historian Peter Stansky, however, reviewing volume 3, recognised 'the sense of political framework over the years but more central and effective is an appealing emphasis on the cultural and the social, generally relayed through selected individuals'.⁶³ The social and cultural features came more to the fore in Schama's treatment of later periods. Philip Harling, Professor of Modern British History, at the University of Kentucky, noted that 'the wonderful series' was not 'mere "trumpet-and-drum" history. He is at pains to relate all the big doings to lived human experience.'⁶⁴ Even more enthusiastic was journalist, publisher and writer Robert McCrum in *The Observer*, for whom 'Schama's interests lie in describing the texture of the common-or-garden existence of ordinary people, and it's here that the book takes wing. His chapter on the great plagues of medieval Britain, and their impact on high policy and everyday life, is at once terrifying and moving, sympathetic and suggestive.'⁶⁵ Will Hutton however, regretted that 'Schama's method does not allow us to establish how events are grounded in economic and social movements and in Britain's links abroad.'⁶⁶ For him the problem was not just partial coverage but that, as Linda Levy Peck commented, 'Schama substitutes biography for analysis.'⁶⁷ Other reviewers also noted Schama's fondness for a history dominated by great men and glamorous people. They believed that while these had great human interest, they did not make for the serious history they knew Schama could provide.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Linda Levy Peck, *AHR Forum*, 674, 676

⁶² Jeremy Black, *History Today*, December 2000, 56-57

⁶³ Peter Stansky, *AHR Forum*, 687

⁶⁴ Philip Harling, *The Public Historian* vol 26 no 2 (Spring 2004), 126, 127

⁶⁵ Robert McCrum, *The Observer*, 1 October 2000

⁶⁶ Will Hutton, *The Observer*, 16 June 2002

⁶⁷ Linda Levy Peck, *AHR Forum*, 679

⁶⁸ Robert Forrest, *National Observer* no 61 (Winter 2004); Roy Foster, *New Republic* 4 December 2000

Coverage of Scotland, Wales and Ireland

One important area where comprehensiveness raised issues of greater significance was the amount of coverage given to Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Originally Schama wanted his history to be 'an exploration of the ambiguities and complexities of what it means to be British...I want it to be a major contribution to the public discussion about how our history shapes our sense of Britishness, or of non-Britishness: of Scottishness, Welshness and Irishness...The Celts and Gaels will not be token walk-on parts. They are integral to the narrative.'⁶⁹ A few judged that he had achieved this, such as Robert McCrum, who found no fault with *A History of Britain*, and thought that Schama's underlying consideration was to show that England was not insular: 'He [Schama] is also topically alert to non-English sensitivities.' Bruce Lenman, a Scottish historian who reviewed the book for H-Net, slightly patronisingly observed that 'for an expatriate metropolitan Englishman he does well to talk about the history of the now British peoples in this distant era with some sense of the fact that they are a complex group...Welsh, English, Scots or Irish whose past needs to be understood rather than used.'⁷⁰ Michael Fry, Scottish journalist and historian, put the view of those who still considered Schama to have written too Anglo-centric a version when he claimed that the book was not a history of Britain but covered Scotland, Wales and Ireland only insofar as they impinged on English history. A real history of Britain should cover the relationships between the nations.⁷¹ Not only that, but 'It is quite clear that for Schama, the seminal events of British history are all English.'⁷² Schama rejected this criticism, pointing out that 'We dealt with the war between the nations in one programme. But to give Wales its five minutes and Scotland its 15 each time would have been appalling television and it would have been ethnic correctness and I hate that.'⁷³ However, as other histories considered in this study show, it is possible to write a more integrated account of British history, showing links between regions and the identity of the British nation.

Schama as presenter

Many commented on Schama's story telling ability, calling him 'a Macaulay for the video age', who raised striking questions such as asking what happened to English Catholicism.⁷⁴ But many critics did not approve of the dominance of Schama's voice. They wanted other opinions to be more prominent to show that history is always about debate. Jeremy Black noted that audiences could follow divergent interpretations in political debate so he believed they could

⁶⁹ Quoted by Ed Vulliamy, *The Guardian*, 30 March 1998

⁷⁰ Bruce Lenman review of vol 1 H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May 2001
www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5133 [accessed 26 May 2010]

⁷¹ Michael Fry, *Sunday Times*, 17 November 2002

⁷² Magnus Linklater, *The Times*, 28 September 2000

⁷³ Joanna Coles 'Why can't history be soap opera?' *The Times*, 4 May 2001

⁷⁴ McCrum; Linda Levy Peck, *AHR Forum*, 677

do so in history too; that they were not given the chance was 'an opportunity missed'.⁷⁵

Historian John Vincent concurred, arguing that history should be concerned with debate and that there was 'barely a whisper of an alternative explanation to interrupt his narrative monologue'.⁷⁶ Miri Rubin writing in the *AHR* also missed the presence of other voices, since they would have 'reminded viewers of the deeply collective nature of the historical enterprise. It would have also suggested that there are different points of view to be had, and that history is above all an act of advocacy embedded in debate.'⁷⁷

To Scott Lucas, Professor of American Studies at the University of Birmingham, writing in the *New Statesman*, the programmes 'promise to be just another pilgrimage to the shrines of national reaffirmation, a tribute not to the common man, but to England's really important people and events'.⁷⁸ He was also disapproving of Schama's 'omnipresence' and his 'folksy authority', noting that major productions in British documentary have focused on the storyteller, citing A J P Taylor, Kenneth Clark, Michael Wood and David Starkey. Lucas however argued that whereas earlier presenters had clearly been giving personal views, Schama's style resembled 'handing down the historical tablets of stone'. Although Schama often emphasised that the series is 'a' history, and not 'the' history, Lucas found it to be 'A History of Britain as revealed by Simon Schama'.⁷⁹ TV history, as Lucas pointed out, often relied on an apparently omniscient presenter. The use of such presenters goes back to Kenneth Clark (1969) and Jacob Bronowski (1973): it did not start with Starkey and Schama. However, the use of presenters does not inevitably mean that the history is not rigorous or argumentative, as historian Tristram Hunt pointed out.⁸⁰ Linda Levy Peck thought that the single, all knowing narrator 'is not the only way to tell a dramatic story'. She implied that Schama might have done better to have followed the example of, for instance, Ken Burns who made the American Civil War series for US TV. He 'replaced the single all-knowing narrator with the many voices of letter writers, newspapers, and speakers, both men and women, many little-known, some famous'; to which he added archival photographs, live modern cinematography, music and narration. In Ken Burns' view, 'this approach did more than merely recount a historical story. It became a kind of "emotional archaeology," trying to unearth the very heart of the American experience'.⁸¹ Historian Justin Champion disagreed. He saw Schama's approach as necessary to his form of television: 'Unlike a book, here the historian is a visual presence...The physicality of this

⁷⁵ Jeremy Black, *History Today*, December 2000

⁷⁶ John Vincent *TLS* 24 November 2000

⁷⁷ Miri Rubin *AHR Forum*, 670

⁷⁸ Scott Lucas, 'Simon says' *New Statesman*, 30 October 2000, 40-41

⁷⁹ Scott Lucas, 'Simon says'

⁸⁰ Tristram Hunt, *The Guardian*, 10 September 2007

⁸¹ Linda Levy Peck, 683

presence, the aspect of performance and engagement is critical to the historical authority of the present.⁸²

In response, Schama argued that his being the 'narrator and interpreter' implied the 'candidly subjective character of the project'. There was no such thing as definitive true history: 'television history can't be the exhaustive and definitive account'; 'the vision of that past is necessarily partial, selective and highly personal as *A History of Britain* was always meant to be'.⁸³ Nor did he accept that having several different voices would provide the openness and debate that its advocates imagined. The historians would still choose what to include. He explained that where matters were contentious, he 'did [his] best to present both sides of the argument' just as he would in his writing. However, he was resolute that he 'did not want...the films to turn into seminars' which are quite different forms of communication.⁸⁴

History on TV

Some reviewers concentrated more on Schama's *History* as television. Television is one of the most effective ways to bring history to the public, taking the subject beyond the specialists in the academy.⁸⁵ Schama and the BBC were proud of the size of the audience who watched the TV programmes: (about 4 m viewers, an audience share of some 20%).⁸⁶ For comparison, the BBC considered that *The Long March of Everyman* 'had been a major radio achievement which had enjoyed considerable audience reaction success', achieving about 550,000 listeners each week.⁸⁷ Some aspects of history TV did superbly well. It could take the viewer to locations where significant events happened, as Justin Champion pointed out in his review of Schama's *History*.⁸⁸ The images could convey ideas, for example the crashing surf with cliffs in *A History of Britain* to emphasise the island nation. It could also, by computer-generated imagery, marvellously show how places or buildings change, as Schama memorably did in the programme on the Reformation where he recreated the 'Catholic' interior of Holy Trinity church, Long Melford, to help answer the question: what became of Catholic England. And, as Adam Gutteridge from the Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past, University of York, has noted, the portrayal of landscape helped viewers situate themselves in the historical scene since many would have visited the places shown. Shots of ruined buildings and the

⁸² Justin Champion, review, *Seeing the past: Simon Schama's A History of Britain and public history**, (review no. 296) URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/296>

⁸³ Simon Schama, *The Observer*, 23 June 2002

⁸⁴ Simon Schama, *AHR Forum A History of Britain: A Response*, 693, 694

⁸⁵ Ian Kershaw, in *History and the Media*, ed David Cannadine (Basingstoke Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan 2004), 122

⁸⁶ Schama, 'Fine-Cutting Clio', 25

⁸⁷ BBC Report to the Programme Review Board (WAC R 137/126/1)

⁸⁸ Justin Champion, review

avoidance of sights of the modern world helped to create a sense of the past still existing in the present.⁸⁹ *A History of Britain* was both a book and a series of programmes, conceived, as Schama explained, as part of an integral project: 'The TV was never a simplified illustration – it was the spur and mainspring. So you can't understand the one without the other, not least of course because I wrote all the scripts, helped with edit, music, sound mix etc.'⁹⁰

Conclusion

Schama's was the new old history; the Whig interpretation updated. Davies's was polemical and very much for its time. *The Isles* took the present situation of Britain and traced how it got to where it is now, with hints at what might come next. At the beginning of the twenty-first century 'Britain is in this triangular moment, it's caught between Europe and Microsoft America' remarked Schama⁹¹, acknowledging the tension on which Davies explicitly comments at the end of his book. Both were extremely readable, although the self-consciousness of the style becomes wearing in both cases.

Schama's treatment of British history picked out what he regarded as significant episodes of which he usually described particular aspects in detail. In so doing, he explored and explained how the traditional story was not borne out by the facts presented. In this way he fulfilled his aim of exposing the incongruities in the traditional story and undermined the traditional version of the inexorable continuity of British history. But he developed no new overall story. He recounted each episode in an engaging, exciting way, exploring characters and motives and showing them in difficult situations, presenting stories from our history to delight and entertain. But due to this episodic character and lack of an overall narrative, Schama's *A History of Britain* amounts to less than the sum of its parts.

Both authors, Davies and Schama, wrote highly personal, lengthy, original and engaging books which are a pleasure to read. The depth of scholarship, though both rely largely on secondary sources, is impressive. The nation was constructed as containing four nations, although England in Schama's was still too prominent for some. Davies's account on the other hand could fail, much of its time, to answer people's needs for a national story. But each generation has to retell national history for its own time.

⁸⁹ Adam Gutteridge in *Report on IPUP's Televisualising the Past Conference* 8 December 2010
<http://www.york.ac.uk/ipup/events/schama/televisualizing-report.html>

⁹⁰ Simon Schama personal communication

⁹¹ Simon Schama quoted in Joanna Coles, 'Why can't history be soap opera?' *The Times* 4 May 2001

Davies's history was very much for and of its time. In its presentation, Schama's pointed the way forward. Much history for the public is now television history. Schama realised this, commenting, 'The future of history, the survival of history is going to depend at least as much, if not more on the new media and television as on the printed page.'⁹² While both books are highly personal conceptions, Davies' was more original as history; Schama told a long-established story. Schama's significance lies partly in its traditional emphasis. The history reading public apparently still wants to be told stirring stories of earlier times 'to feed the popular hunger for heroic narrative', and to see its nation as something to be proud of. Schama's patriotism becomes evident in his text. In his preface he recalled re-reading Churchill's *History* and realising that it still had something to contribute to a late twentieth century understanding of Britain. By the end of his book he was recalling Orwell's 'fugitive Golden Country [where] nature, love, freedom are all ravelled up together. Some before him called such a place of hopes and blessings "Jerusalem". And some of us, obstinately, think we can call it Britain.'⁹³

⁹² Quoted in Justin Champion review

⁹³ Schama vol 1, 15; vol 3, 558

CONCLUSION

Since 1900, around fifty comprehensive histories of England/Britain for general readers have been written. In each decade fresh versions were made. Publishers apparently found repeated versions of British history commercially profitable; the books sold, and presumably were read. Why was there a perceived need to keep re-telling national history? This study has examined ways of understanding the development of British national history written for a popular readership in the twentieth century. It has discussed influences on the narratives and identified changes to them.

I used narrative theory and cultural memory to help understand the numbers and changes in popular national histories. Five main questions were suggested by this theoretical approach and formed the framework for this investigation. Aspects common to all narratives – the story, the authors and the audience – were supplemented by discussion of the subject of the narrative, the nation, and how it was conceptualised, and by considering the role of national history and these particular presentations of it in British cultural life since the beginning of the twentieth century. I considered how present concerns at the time of writing led to reshaping the account of the past, and how the histories reflected the political, cultural and historiographical situation when the histories were written and how changes in this contemporary context encouraged fresh approaches. As well as the texts and reviews, I drew on interviews with authors and on material available in historians' personal papers and publishers' archives.

Whereas the usual account of the general development of British historiography is represented as the 'Whig Interpretation of History' being modified under the impact of the First and Second World Wars, the rise of social history and the influence of post-modernism, this account has argued that in popular histories for the general reader there have been multiple narratives of British history, that even the apparently Whiggish accounts are less formulaic and more nuanced than the traditional description, and that the Whig narrative has persisted throughout the twentieth century. History of a confident, exceptionalist kind, with a focus on politics and the elite, sometimes with a traditional emphasis on development of parliament and growth of liberty is still presented. National history is often represented as having been written to tell us how we got to where we are now – a presentist justification, as if it had no other purpose.

Histories produced at different times do not have uniform characteristics making a homogeneous whole. In each period there is considerable variation in the responses historians make to the challenge of writing a convincing and relevant national narrative. The stimuli to shifts in the narrative were either changes in historiography or in the nation's perception of itself, sometimes driven by external events like war.

Immediately after both the First and Second World Wars few national histories were written. At both times historians, like the population as a whole, needed time to adjust to a new situation. The First World War shook belief in enduring liberal values, and when histories were produced in the inter-war period, some, such as Lettice Fisher's, found more to warn about than to celebrate. Immediately after the Second World War, historians wrote little. They, like their post First World War colleagues, struggled with their former teleology as they re-established professional life. History in the 1950s was traditional, even romantic and patriotic. To avoid confronting the uncomfortable present of a nation in relative decline, some writers ended their narrative before the time of writing. Ending before the present day was more common in this than in other periods. After this slow-down, historians resumed the writing of comprehensive histories for the public. Some historians (Elton, Strong, Lee, and to some extent Black) continued to present a traditional understanding of English history. Even Schama, although he stated explicitly that he wanted to emphasise contingency, picked episodes of traditional significance to focus on.

The introduction of 'history from below' in the 1960s created more focus on people and their lives rather than on high politics. National histories became increasingly histories of society. Perhaps concerns about British society in the 1970s also encouraged this approach. As Paul Johnson explained, he found that his questions about present society could be answered satisfactorily only by tracing society to its earliest roots.¹ His history was a response to Britain joining the EEC, as was Pocock's call for a new approach to British history that took more account of England's links with other parts of Britain and with the rest of the world. Growing nationalism within the UK pushed to the forefront of historians' attention that the UK was a multi-national, not a unitary state.

The largely Whig narrative was not the only one before the Second World War. As John Burrow notes, '...the characteristics of Whig history can be not rejected but simply relocated, endowed

¹ Paul Johnson, *The Offshore Islanders: A History of the English People* (Phoenix 1995), 3-5

with a different protagonist; manifest destiny is a game any people can play.’² One alternative was the Marxist narrative. This was a story about the struggle of the working class towards emancipation and the realisation of communism; when employed to interpret English/British history it produced an account of the decline of feudalism, the rise of capitalism, and the continuing struggle of the working class to emancipate itself and its partial success. The example discussed in this study is A L Morton’s *People’s History of England*, originally published in 1938 by Victor Gollancz as a Left Book Club selection, indicating its political place in the culture. Marxist histories of other topics contributed to Marxist interpretations of national history. Catholic histories (Belloc, Chesterton) characterised the Reformation as a disaster, and privileged the role of religion in national life and identity, flavouring accounts of England’s decline with nostalgia for medieval society. These interpretative frameworks came to be seen as unconvincing in broad accounts of national history. Those who subscribed to them concentrated on shorter periods (Hobsbawm on nineteenth century European history; Eamon Duffy on the Reformation in England).

As well as changes to the content and emphasis, historians altered their style and approach to the narrative. The commonest approach was political history, often told as a series of events with few links to show how events developed from existing situations. Innes and Wingfield-Stratford before the First World War, Feiling after the Second, and Strong and Lee in more recent times, are examples. But, as Justin Champion pointed out, ‘History is never just the “when and how”, but also the “why and what it means.”’³ Some historians spent most of their time relating events with little explanation of the significance of events within the overall story, thereby implying that the narrative speaks for itself. Historians writing later took more care to provide interpretations. The narrative was no longer broken into long passages of political history, followed by brief, unconnected sections on art, literature and even economic and social changes that were often little more than lists of prominent people. New styles of writing and new approaches to history created more integrated accounts of the national past, giving a more complete picture of the nation that showed how changes in one aspect depended on changes in others. Briggs was particularly strong in this respect.

While some histories have a strong interpretative drive, for instance A L Morton’s English history as the rise of the working class, Johnson’s anti-European account, and Davies’s four

² John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (Allen Lane 2007), 505

³ Justin Champion, *Seeing the past: Simon Schama’s A History of Britain and public history**, (review no. 296) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/296>

nations' history challenging the traditional Anglo-centric approach, this survey of national histories shows that there were few narratives arguing a case, and many more rehearsing well-known approaches. These argumentative interpretations may irritate some readers, but they can also stimulate thinking and lead to a more engaged readership.

Seaman argued that 'To attempt to write a one-volume history of England is to make an assault on the impossible'.⁴ Michael Mason, BBC series producer of *The Long March of Everyman*, believed that it was impractical by the 1970s for a single author to present a history of the nation.⁵ Multi-author national history continues to be produced. Editing *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain*, Kenneth Morgan considered that such an approach is 'inescapable' since the 'confident' pre-First World War historians with 'compendious' minds no longer exist.⁶ These considerations do not appear to deter journalists or historians from writing single-author complete accounts of British national history. The single author is better able to create a unified interpretation throughout the narrative and this may be more appealing to the audience. A recent book on comprehensive British history, *A World by Itself*, did not justify or explain why six historians collaborated, except in general comments on the joint and cumulative character of historical practice.⁷ Oxford and Penguin are still producing volumes in their history of England/Britain series but multi-author multi-volume accounts are not as common, so probably not as popular as earlier in the twentieth century.

The nation is different in the early twenty-first century compared with 1900 in territorial extent and political structure: no longer Great Britain and Ireland, but Great Britain and Northern Ireland with devolved government in Scotland and Wales. It no longer has a colonial empire. It is also part of the European Union. To what extent were these developments reflected in national histories? Did the histories being studied construct the nation differently at different points in the century?

This analysis of popular histories shows that historians of the nation were always aware that it was comprised of component parts, but not until the late 1980s did they made this awareness explicit in their narratives. The ambiguity of the 'nation' as 'England' or 'Britain' persisted throughout the century to the present. Many of the historians considered here constructed the history of the nation as really about England. The key features were English monarchy, English parliament and freedom under English common law. Scotland, Wales and Ireland were

⁴ L C B Seaman, introduction to *A New History of England 410-1975*, (Papermac 1982), xix

⁵ BBC Written Archives (WAC R51/1,171/1 9 March 1970)

⁶ Kenneth O Morgan, 'Editor's Foreword', *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* (OUP 2000) vi

⁷ Ed Jonathan Clark, *A World by Itself: A History of the British Isles* (Heinemann 2010)

discussed only when England directly interacted with them. The formation of Great Britain and then the United Kingdom were related from the English point of view. The view in 1804 of David Scott, MP for Perthshire, that 'We commonly when speaking of British subjects call them English, be they English, Scots or Irish; he will never be offended, therefore,...with the word English being applied in future to express any of His Majesty's subjects, or suppose it can be meant as an allusion to any part of the United Kingdom' still seemed to prevail.⁸ Important in changing historians' understanding of the nation whose history they were writing was the growth of nationalist movements in Britain, which resulted in significant devolution for Scotland and Wales in 1997 and Northern Ireland in 1998 and growing identification with these countries in terms of national self-definition. Although historians continue to write Anglo-centric history, they now explain their rationale. Such history is likely to continue, but perhaps, as Robbins suggested, as histories of England 'on its own terms', not as a surrogate for the whole nation.⁹ Kearney's and Davies' work using the four nations approach contributed to the terms 'Britain' and 'England' no longer being used synonymously. Insofar as national history helps to construct national identity, constructing the state as containing more than one nation provides readers with choice about what they identify with.

The narrators of British national history did not find a satisfactory way to discuss Ireland. The less knowledgeable reader would not learn that in nineteenth century Great Britain and Ireland formed one political state. They would hardly learn that Scotland and England had been one political state from 1707. Apart from Frank Welsh, the historians discussed here covered Ireland in even less detail than they covered Scotland. Some considered Irish Home Rule, but focused more on the effect of the campaign on Westminster politics than on broader constitutional implications. By virtually excluding events in Ireland even in the nineteenth century (apart from the Famine) they excluded it from the public understanding of the British nation. This response reflects the ambiguity in the relationship between England and Ireland and Great Britain and Ireland that still exists in the minds of many British people.¹⁰

Apart from Churchill, no historian constructed the nation whose history was being written as encompassing the British people wherever they lived. Although all the histories refer at least to the American colonies, the Empire, never very prominent, features little in the narrative after 1918. Nor was there discussion of the impact of the Empire on the metropole in line with recent historiography.

⁸ Quoted in Norman Davies *The Isles*, 617

⁹ Interview with Keith Robbins

¹⁰ The team from the UK which took part in the 2012 Olympic Games was called 'Team GB', rather than 'Team UK' although it included athletes from Northern Ireland who were annoyed by this nomenclature.

Historians widened their conception of who constitutes the nation. Just as from the 1970s historians generally expanded their subject matter to include the poor, the working class, women and people of other ethnicities, so historians of Britain came to incorporate others as well as the political elite. The social history approach from the 1970s on made ordinary people and their lives more prominent in the narrative, but a gendered approach to the national history still has to be undertaken. Race as a category also became significant in historiography more generally, but non-white inhabitants of Britain are absent from these histories. This omission means that this presentation of national history is not addressed to, or representative of, the whole community. It is an area where new approaches could usefully be developed.

The boundaries between historians professionally engaged in writing and teaching history, and those for whom the practice of history is not their main occupation, are blurred. In the nineteenth century major historians such as Macaulay and Carlyle expected their work to be read extensively and wrote for a wide audience. Later, it was not uncommon for historians, Trevelyan and Lettice Fisher for example, to move between academic posts and other work. Some, such as Carrington, Jackson and Harrison worked in adult education, taking their expertise to learners outside the academy.

William Cronon, President of the American Historical Association, wondered in a recent article whether high school teachers, writers of high-quality popular histories, producers of historical documentaries, curators of historical exhibitions, and historical web site designers were all 'professional historians' (he thought they were).¹¹ Apart from the last, all these categories contain one or more of the authors discussed here. The criteria for professional historian are not as clear as for, e.g., law or medicine. The term is now generally taken to mean experience of graduate work, appropriate training in research methods and employment in university, being part of a scholarly community. The practice of reviewing each other's work - Briggs on GN Clark, Powicke on Mitchell and Leys, Plumb on Briggs' social history - is one instance of the historians' community in action. Professional jealousy and criticism among different sorts of practitioners is common - amateurs' books seem to get more notice, professionals complain about lack of public profile.¹²

¹¹ William Cronon, 'Professional Boredom', *Perspectives on History* American Historical Association March 2012 <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2012/1202/Scholarly-Authority-in-a-Wikified-World.cfm> [accessed 2 September 2012]

¹² Peter Lambert, 'The professionalisation of history in Britain' <http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/professionalisation.html> [accessed 2 September 2012]

Moving between academia and other work is now rare. Independent scholars still exist, but lack of private means such as Wingfield-Stratford benefited from, or of a massive income from popular books enjoyed by Hibbert and Bryant, contribute to making it harder to earn a living by historical writing outside the academy. Many authors who are not employed by universities, and who write history, work at something else – often journalism or other work within the media. Schoolteachers no longer produce history for the general public, although they sometimes write school textbooks. Some historians have become celebrities: Simon Schama, David Starkey and Niall Ferguson. Their presentations attract a lot of media attention and some criticism from historians working in universities.

Perhaps for writers of popular national history who regard producing history as a public duty or service, the extent of engagement with the general reader, rather than the academic training and being part of the academic community, is significant. John Lukacs argued that there is no essential difference between the two groups. Their training is different, but all historians have to recreate the past in their minds and use everyday language to communicate their interpretations. One difference may be that amateur historians, (who write for general readers) sometimes produce better prose. The professionals, claimed Lukacs, may have reduced their range of vision and their understanding of human nature.¹³ But some professionals also wrote and continue to write history that is attractive to non-specialists and can use good prose even when writing for each other.

Popular histories of the nation are part of public history – accessible history for ordinary people. Few comprehensive histories of England/Britain are now being produced. Some, such as Rebecca Fraser's *A People's History of Britain* (2003) and Simon Jenkins' *A Short History of England* (2011), continue to be written without any apparent awareness of, or interest, in recent scholarly approaches to the national past. In these narratives, the core meaning of English/British history is still understood as the actions of monarchs and of elite individuals. English if not British exceptionalism continues to be displayed. The history of England is still the main emphasis. There is little social or economic history; the integrated narrative Briggs used, and that Professor Charles Phythian-Adams declared in 1998 historians were still trying to get right (see chapter 7), is rarely attempted.

¹³ John Lukacs, 'Writing' (1990) in *Remembered Past: John Lukacs on History, Historians, and Historical Knowledge*, ed Mark G Malvasi and Jeffrey O Nelson, (ISI Books Wilmington Delaware 2005), 654

While there were few chronological comprehensive versions of British history produced from around 1990, the genre expanded in two directions. In one direction are those like Robert Lacey *Great Tales from English History* (2007), Sean Lang *British History for Dummies* (2006) and John O'Farrell, *An Utterly Impartial History of Britain* (2007), which present history largely as entertainment. In the other, historians and writers adopt more scholarly but fresh approaches. Several works produced at the beginning of the twenty-first century, such as Stephen Oppenheimer's *The Origins of the British* (2006), considered early British history in the light of genetics, revealing new findings about our ancestors and our genetic makeup. Others combined genetics with archaeology or used archaeology as an approach to economic and social history, for instance *The Tribes of Britain* by the archaeologist David Miles (2005). This focus on distant forebears feeds what seems to be an appetite for the past as different and strange, yet familiar because the places appear to be the same and the people connected to us. This approach also privileges those inhabitants whose ancestors lived in Britain, rather than those descended from more recent immigrants. It contributes to constructing British national identity as continuous and European, raising the question of whether and how a national history might address all the present inhabitants.

In the past twenty years, and especially in the last decade, the output and market for history for a public audience appears to have grown and changed. The audience is larger and better educated, print publishing has grown and there is more history on TV. Books with TV tie-ins will increasingly create different styles of presentation each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Rob Bartlett on the Normans, Dermot McCulloch on the history of Christian England, are examples of serious British history using both print and TV. Presentations of postwar British history from Peter Hennessy, and David Kynaston, for example are scholarly and well-written engaging works with a clear narrative drive. Biographies, such as Edward Pearce on Walpole and Thomas Penn on Henry VII, books on big themes such as *Empire* (Ferguson and Paxman), *Jerusalem*, (Simon Sebag Montefiore) and on smaller ones (Vickery on Georgian interiors) flourish.

This has been necessarily a limited study. There are four areas where further work would be useful and interesting. First, as was indicated in the introduction, the chronological is not the only possible approach. Studies of more academic approaches to changing interpretations have been made, but not in popular histories.¹⁴ A thematic, complementary approach would reveal the relative importance of particular events in the national narrative, changes in

¹⁴ Ronald Hutton, *Debates in Stuart History* (Basingstoke Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan 2004)

understanding these events and their role in the national culture. Second, many authors considered here justify their work on the grounds that readers have forgotten their school history or that their history left much out. Work by Stephen Heathorn on school textbooks in the earlier part of the period, and by David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon has explored school history.¹⁵ How far school history influenced popular history would link the experiences of young people's historical education with adult interest in national history. Third, this has been a study focusing on histories of England or Britain. But separate narratives of Scotland, Wales and Ireland are increasingly produced for the public. A similar study considering how relations with England are treated and whether those nations are conceptualised as part of Britain would extend our understanding of how the nation is imagined at different times. Lastly, this study has been confined to works published in Britain. But other historians, particularly in English-speaking countries, also write the history of this nation. Perceptions of England/Britain from outside would help illuminate some of the issues arising for this nation's historiography. A comparative framework, such as that used in the 'Writing the Nation' series, would add to our understanding.¹⁶

This study increases our understanding of how British history was presented to the nation in the following areas: the shape and mood of the narrative, the conception of the nation in geographical, political and social terms, the background and attitudes of the narrators, and the role of these narratives in forming British identity. The national story responded to several changes: in the political state, in the perception of the nation, in theorising about nation building, how history is written in Britain (history of society, integration of topics, and counterfactual history for example), changes in narrators, the audience, and in the sources used. It is a story of continuities in that the outlines remain the same, old-style Whig history is still being written (e.g. by Roy Strong), its place in national culture is still important (see continual debates about history in schools), and in spite of all the efforts of historians, the expected audiences are believed still to know no British history apart from a few colourful episodes. Asa Briggs noted that 'We have more than one yesterday', so historians of Britain will continue to write versions of national history that both reflect and shape our perceptions of the nation.¹⁷

¹⁵ Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country and Race: constructing gender, class and Englishness in the elementary school, 1880-1914* (University of Toronto Press 1999); David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth Century England* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011)

¹⁶ *Writing the Nation: National Historiographies and the Making of Nation States in 19th and 20th Century Europe* series General Editors Stefan Berger, Christoph Conrad and Guy P Marchal

¹⁷ Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England*, (Penguin 2nd edition 1987) 370

APPENDIX 1

BIOGRAPHIES OF HISTORIANS

Ashley, Maurice (1907-1994)

Education: St Paul's School London, New College Oxford First Class degree Modern History
War service (FWW): Intelligence (major)
Profession: 1929-33 Research assistant to Winston Churchill
1933-37 journalist on *Manchester Guardian*; 1937-39 *The Times*;
1946-58 Deputy Editor, and 1958-67 Editor of the *Listener*
President of the Cromwell Association; specialist in C17th
The People of England: A Social and Economic History (1982)

Barker, Theo (1923-2001)

Education: Cowley School, St Helens; Jesus College Oxford First Class degree Modern History;
Manchester University PhD
Profession: 1953-64 taught at LSE; 1964-76 Professor of Economic and Social History at
University of Kent; 1976-83 Professor of Economic History at LSE
The Long March of Everyman (1975)

Belloc, Hilaire (1870-1953)

Education: John Henry Newman Oratory School Birmingham, Balliol College Oxford
Profession: 1906-10 Liberal MP for Salford South; 1914-20 journalist
Independent writer of many historical biographies and military history, and updated editions
of Lingard's *History of England*
A Shorter History of England (1934)

Black, Jeremy (1955-)

Education: Cambridge University starred First in History; Oxford DPhil
Durham University; Professor of History at Exeter University
Prolific historian; focus on C18th, military, diplomatic and geographical history
A History of the British Isles (1996)

Bowle, John (1905-1988)

Education: Marlborough College, Balliol College Oxford
War service (SWW): Air Ministry and Foreign Office
Profession: school teacher, Westminster School and Eton
Lecturer at Wadham College Oxford 1947-49; then went to Bruges as Director of the
Preparatory Session of the College of Europe⁹²⁹ 1950-67, Professor of Political Theory
Visiting professorships at American universities
The English Experience (1971)

Briggs, Asa (1921-)

Education: Keighley Grammar School Yorkshire, Sidney Sussex College Cambridge history
degree 1921; London University External degree in economics 1941
War service (SWW): Intelligence (Bletchley Park)

⁹²⁹ College of Europe, founded in 1948, the first university institute of postgraduate studies and training in European affairs

1945-55 Fellow of [Worcester College, Oxford](#); 1950-55 [University Reader](#) in Recent Social and Economic History; 1953-55 Faculty Fellow of [Nuffield College](#); 1955-61 Professor of Modern History at the [University of Leeds](#); 1961-76 Professor of History at the [University of Sussex](#); 1976-91 Provost of Worcester College Oxford; 1978-94 Chancellor of the Open University
Specialist in Victorian social and economic history; wrote history of BBC
Created Baron Briggs of Lewes in the county of East Sussex 1984
A Social History of England (1983)

Bryant, Arthur (1899-1985)

Education: Harrow School; Queen's College Oxford (Distinction in short course for ex-servicemen 1920)
War service (FWW): 1917 Royal Flying Corps
Profession: teacher, council school in Holloway; 1927 called to the bar; 1923 Principal, Cambridge School of Arts, Crafts and Technology; lecturer Oxford University Extra Mural Department 1926-36
1929 adviser to Bonar Law College, Ashridge Herts
Succeeded G K Chesterton as writer of 'Our note book' for *Illustrated London News* and thereafter a freelance writer
A History of Britain and the British People (3 vols, 1984, 1986, 1990)

Butterfield, Herbert (1900-79)

Education: Keighley Grammar School, Peterhouse Cambridge First in History 1923
Profession: 1923-79 Fellow of Peterhouse; 1955-68 Master; 1944 Professor of Modern History; 1963 Regius Professor
Knighted 1968. Author of *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931)
The Englishman and His History (1944)

Carrington, C E (1897-1990)

Education: Oxford University
War service (FWW): served on Western and Italian fronts; Military Cross
(SWW): 1941-45 Lieutenant-Colonel on the General Staff.
Profession: Teacher, 1921-24 and 1926-29 Haileybury College; 1924-25 lecturer Pembroke College Oxford ; 1929-54 Educational Secretary to the Cambridge University Press; official biographer of Rudyard Kipling; wrote war memoir *Soldier from the Wars Returning* under the name Charles Edmonds
(with J Hampden Jackson) *A History of England* (1932)

Chesterton, G K (1874-1936)

Education: St Paul's School; the [Slade School of Art](#); literature classes at [University College London](#) but did not complete a degree at either.
Profession: journalist; 1902 a weekly opinion column in the [Daily News](#), followed in 1905 by a weekly column in [The Illustrated London News](#), until 1935. Novelist, essayist
A Short History of England (1917)

Churchill, Winston (1874-1965)

Education: Harrow School; Royal Military College Sandhurst
A History of the English-speaking Peoples (1956-58)

Clark, G N (Sir George) (1890-1979)

Education: Bootham School York, Balliol College Oxford, First in Greats and First in History
War service (FWW): 1st Battalion Post Office Rifles; 1916 prisoner of war in Germany

Profession: 1919 Fellowship at Oriel College Oxford; 1931 Chichele professor of economic history; 1943 Regius Professor of Modern History Cambridge; Editor of the Oxford History of England and of the New Cambridge Modern History; 1947 Provost of Oriel College Oxford
English History: A Survey (1971)

Davies, Norman (1939-

Education: Magdalen College Oxford; Sussex University; Jagiellonian University Cracow, Alastair Horne Research Fellow St. Antony's College Oxford
1971-96 School of Slavonic and East European Studies (professor from 1985)
Specialist in history of Poland
The Isles: A History (2000)

Elton, Geoffrey (1921-94)

German Jewish refugee, arrived in England 1939
Education: External London degree; UCL after the war
War service (SWW): sergeant, then field intelligence
Profession: 1949 lecturer Cambridge; 1967 Professor of English constitutional history; 1983-88 Regius Professor Modern History Cambridge
The English (1990)

Feiling, Keith (1884-1977)

Education: Marlborough College, Balliol College Oxford
War service (FWW): active service
Profession: Fellow of All Souls; 1907-09 history lecturer University of Toronto; 1909-46 lecturer, then Fellow, Christ Church College Oxford; 1946-50 Chichele Chair of Modern History
Assisted Churchill with his biography of Marlborough and with his *History of the English-speaking Peoples*
A History of England (1950)

Fisher, Lettice (Mrs H A L Fisher) (1875-1956)

Education: Francis Holland School, London; Somerville College Oxford; LSE
Profession: 1902-13 Tutor in history St Hugh's College Oxford
Founder and Chair, National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child
An introductory history of England and Europe from the earliest times to the present day (1935)

Fry, Somerset Plantagenet (1931-96)

Education: Lancing College; St Catherine's Society Oxford
Profession: Editor of Books, HMSO Publications Division; independent writer
2000 Years of British Life: a social history of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland (1972)

Gloag, J E (1896-1981)

Education: Battersea Grammar School; studied architecture at Regent St Poly
War Service (FWW): the Essex Regiment, Household Brigade Cadet Battalion, Welsh Guards
Profession: 1928 Director, Pritchard, Wood and Partners, advertisers; President, Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain
2000 Years of England (1952)

Halliday, F E (1903-1982)

Education: Giggleswick School; King's College Cambridge
Profession: 1924-48 teacher at Cheltenham College; thereafter an independent writer
Shakespeare scholar and writer of popular histories
England: A Concise History (1964)
An Illustrated Cultural History of England (1967)

Hamilton, Henry (1896-1964)

Education: Glasgow University

Profession: 1925-64 Aberdeen University lecturer in economic history; 1945 Jaffray Professor of Political Economy

History of the homeland: the story of the British background (1947)

Harrison, J F C (1921-

Education: City Boys' School Leicester; Selwyn College Cambridge

War service (SWW): captain in infantry

Profession: 1945-61 lecturer, then Deputy Director of the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Leeds; 1961-70 Professor of History, University of Wisconsin; 1970-to retirement Professor of History, University of Sussex

The Common People: a History from the Norman Conquest to the Present (1984)

Hearnshaw, F J C (1896-1946)

Education: Manchester Grammar School; Peterhouse, Cambridge

Profession: 1900-10, Professor of History at Hartley University College, Southampton;

1910-12, Professor of Modern History, Armstrong College of the University of Durham; 1912-

34, Professor of Medieval History, King's College London; 1926-28 president, Historical Association; 1931-34 secretary, Royal Historical Society

Outlines of the History of the British Isles (1938)

Hibbert, Christopher (1924-2008)

Education: Radley College; Oriel College Oxford

War service (SWW): infantry officer with the London Irish Rifles and fought in Italy from 1944 to 1945; Military Cross

Profession: Biographer and private historian

The English: A Social History 1066-45 (1987)

The Story of England (1992)

Innes, A D (1863-1938)

Education: Oriel College Oxford

Also wrote history text books for schools

A History of the British Nation from Earliest Times to the Present Day (1912)

The History of England and the British Empire (1913-15)

Jackson, J Hampden (1907-66)

Education: King William's College; Christ Church Oxford,

1929-38 Schoolmaster at Haileybury; 1938-47 lecturer, Oxford Extra-Mural Board; 1947-66

lecturer Cambridge Extra-Mural Board

Prolific author of left-leaning histories

(with C E Carrington) *History of England* (1932)

Jerrold, Douglas (1893-1964)

Education: Westminster School; New College Oxford

War service: wounded at Gallipoli

1923 Founder of Eyre and Spottiswoode; chairman from 1945

1930-36 editor of the *English Review*

1944 editor of the *New English Review*

England: Past, Present and Future (1950)

Johnson, Paul (1928-

Education: Stonyhurst College; Magdalen College Oxford

Journalist and popular historian

1955-70 on staff of *New Statesman*; editor 1965-70

The Offshore Islanders: England's People from Roman Occupation to the Present/to European Entry (1972), 1985 ed as *History of the English People*; 1998 ed as *Offshore Islanders: A History of the English People*

Kearney, Hugh (1924-

Education: Peterhouse College Cambridge

1948 assistant secretary Manchester University Press; 1950-62 'assistant' (lecturer) University of Dublin; 1962-70 lecturer University of Sussex; 1970 Richard Pares Professor of History, University of Edinburgh; 1975-99 Amundson Professor of History, University of Pittsburgh

The British Isles: A History of Four Nations (1989)

Lee, Christopher (1941-

Education: Goldsmiths College London; MA Cambridge

Defence and foreign affairs correspondent for the BBC

First Quatercentenary Fellow in Contemporary History at Emmanuel College Cambridge and Gomes Lecturer

This Sceptred Isle radio series and book (1997)

The Twentieth Century (2000)

Source: *History Today* September 2004

Leys, Mary Dorothy Rose, (c1900-1967)

Education: Somerville College Oxford

1919-52 history tutor, Society of Home Students (later became St Anne's College)

University lecturer until 1955

1938-55 Vice-Principal, St Anne's

A History of the English People (1950) (with R D Mitchell)

Source: obituary in *The Times* 8 September 1967

Maude, Angus E U (1912-1993)

Education: Rugby School and Oriel College Oxford (PPE)

Journalist

Served in north Africa until 1942 when made POW

Conservative MP 1950-56; 1963-83; journalist

With Enoch Powell, member of One Nation group

Biography of a Nation: A Short History of Britain (with Enoch Powell)

McElwee, William (1907-1978)

Christ Church, Oxford University

School teacher and head of history, Stowe School 1932-1962 with a break for war service, during which he was awarded the MC for action in Normandy

Head of Modern Studies, Sandhurst. *The Story of England* 'a notable success'

The story of England, from the time of King Alfred to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II 1954

Source: <http://www.stowe.co.uk/news-and-events/news-archive/204/mcelwee-awards>

The Times obituary 29 November 1978

Melly, George, 'Two Epicurean Stoics' *Spectator* 15 January 2000

Mitchell, Rosamond Josceleyne (1902-96)

[Royal Historical Society](#)'s Alexander Medal 1936 winner
British Archaeological Society's Reginald Taylor Prize 1938 winner
Married Mary Leys' brother John; the two authors were sisters-in-law
A History of the English People (1950) with M D R Leys

Morton, A L (1903-1987)

Education: Cambridge University
School teacher (Summerhill) and journalist (*Daily Worker*); member of the Communist Party
A People's History of England (1938)

Murphy, Eileen

Nothing known
Our last two thousand years. An Irishwoman's history of England (1935)

Pollard, A F (1869-1948)

Education: Felstead School; Jesus College Oxford, read classics, then history
Freelance coaching in London; 1893-1901 assistant editor DNB
1903-31 part time professor of constitutional history London University
1906, Founder, Historical Association
1921 founded IHR; director until 1939
The History of England: a study in political evolution (1912)

Powell, (J E) Enoch (1912-98)

Education: King Edward's School Birmingham; Trinity College Cambridge
War service Second World War Intelligence service; rose from private to brigadier
Professor of Greek, Sydney Australia, 1938-9
Conservative MP 1950-74; Minister of Health 1960-63
Ulster Unionist MP 1974-87
(with Angus Maude) *Biography of a Nation: a Short History of Britain* (1955)

Ridley, Jasper (1920-2004)

Education: Felcourt School, the Sorbonne and Magdalen College Oxford
Trained as a barrister
Independent writer, principally of biographies
A History of England (1981)
Source: *Telegraph* obituary 8 July 2004

Robbins, Keith (1940-)

Education: Bristol Grammar School; Magdalen and St Anthony's College Oxford
1963 lecturer at York
1971 Professor of History University College of North Wales, Bangor
1980 Professor of Modern History Glasgow
1992-2003 Professor of History, Lampeter and Vice Chancellor University of Wales
Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the idea of Britishness (1998)

Rowse, A L (1903-1997)

Education: St Austell County Grammar School, Christ Church Oxford
Fellow of All Souls; lecturer at LSE; editor of Teach Yourself History series; private scholar after 1974
Shakespeare specialist
The Spirit of English history (1943)
The Story of Britain (1979)

Schama, Simon (1945-)

Education: Haberdashers School; Christ's College Cambridge
1966-76 Fellow, Christ's College Cambridge; 1976-80 Fellow and Tutor in Modern History, Brasenose College Oxford; 1980-93 professor of Art History and History Harvard University New York; from 1993 professor of Art History and History at Columbia University New York
A History of Britain 3 vols (2000-2002)

Seaman, L C B (1911-86)

Polytechnic Secondary School, London; Downing College Cambridge
History teacher, Quintin Kynaston School; taught at summer schools; examiner
A new history of England 410 – 1975 (1981)

Sellar, W C (1898-1951)

Education: Fettes College; Oriel College Oxford
War service: (FWW) King's Own Scottish Borderers second lieutenant, served in France and Germany
School teacher at Fettes, Canford School and Charterhouse
(with R J Yeatman) *1066 And All That* (1930)

Strong, Roy (1935-)

Education: Edmonton County Grammar School; Queen Mary College London; Warburg Institute
1967-73 Director, National Portrait Gallery; 1973-87 Director of the V&A Museum
The Story of Britain: A People's History (1998)

Trevelyan, G M (1876-1962)

Education: Harrow School; Trinity College Cambridge
1896 Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge
1903 resigned Fellowship and moved to London; private scholar
War service: 1915, commandant of Red Cross ambulance service in Italy
1927 Regius Professor of History at Cambridge
1940 Master of Trinity College Cambridge
History of England (1926)
English Social History (1944)

Welsh, Frank (1931-)

Education: Gateshead and Blaydon Grammar Schools; Magdalene College Cambridge
Profession: international business and banking, independent writer
The Four Nations: A History of the United Kingdom (2002)

White, Reginald (1905-1971)

Education: Downing College Cambridge
Profession: private coaching and lecturing before the Second World War
1946 Fellow of Downing College and lecturer in history
1950s and early 1960s wrote scripts on historical topics for BBC Schools Broadcasting Department
A Short History of England (1967)

Williamson, J A (1886-1964)

Education: Watford Grammar School; London University
Profession: 1910-37 history teacher at Westminster City School
1939 Ford's lecturer Oxford University on 'The Ocean in English History'
The Evolution of England: a Commentary on the Facts (1931)

Wingfield-Stratford, E (1882-1971)

Education: Eton College; King's College Cambridge

1913 DSc London awarded for thesis called 'the History of English Patriotism'

War service (FWW) The Royal Kent Regiment in India

Private scholar

The History of English Patriotism (1913)

The History of British Civilisation (1928)

The Foundations of British Patriotism (1939)

Woodward, E L (1890-1971)

Education: Merchant Taylor's School; Corpus Christi College Oxford

War service: FWW: artillery brigade, western front; military intelligence, Salonika; historical branch Foreign Office; SWW: political intelligence and Foreign Office; editor *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*

1919 Fellow of All Souls; 1922-39 lecturer at New College Oxford; 1944 professor of international relations Oxford; 1947 first holder of the new professorship of modern history; 1951-61 research professor at Princeton USA

History of England (1947)

Yeatman, R J (1897-1968)

Education: Oriel College Oxford

War service (FWW): Military Cross; service in SWW

Teacher at Canford School and Charterhouse; worked for Kodak as advertising manager; 1951-62 copywriter at S L Benson Ltd

(with W C Sellar) *1066 And All That* (1930)

APPENDIX 2

HISTORIANS CONTRIBUTING AS PROGRAMME DIRECTORS ON THE LONG MARCH OF EVERYMAN

The job titles are given as at the time of their contribution

Barry Cunliffe, Professor of Archaeology, Southampton University (prehistoric and Roman Britain)

Anne Ross, former Research Fellow, School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh (the Celts)

H R Loyn, Professor of Medieval History, University College Cardiff (the Anglo-Saxons)

Maurice Keen, Tutor in Medieval History, Balliol College Oxford	}	
Paul Hyams, Lecturer in Modern History, Pembroke College, Oxford	}	medieval society
Barrie Dobson, Lecturer in History, York University	}	

Rodney Hilton, Professor of Medieval History, Birmingham University (transition from the medieval world)

Joel Hurstfield, Professor of English History, University College, London (the Elizabethan Age)

Valerie Pearl, Reader in the History of London, University College, London (London in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries)

Christopher Hill, Professor of History and Master of Balliol College, Oxford (the Civil War)

Peter Mathias, Chichele Professor of Economic History and Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford (commerce and trade in C 17th and 18th)

F M L Thompson, Professor of Modern History, Bedford College, London (the landed gentry from C 17th to mid-19th)

Joan Thirsk, Reader in Economic History and Fellow of St Hilda's College, Oxford (the countryside, up to the Industrial Revolution)

John F C Harrison, Professor of History, Sussex University (the Industrial Revolution)

Brian Bond, Lecturer in War Studies, King's College, London, and Christopher Lloyd, former Professor of History, Royal Naval College Greenwich (Army and Navy from the Napoleonic Wars to the Crimea)

Gwyn Williams, Professor of History, York University (Radicals of the late C18th and early C19th)

George Rudé, Professor of History, Sir George Williams University Montreal Canada (popular politics of the Industrial Revolution)

Theo Barker, Professor of Economic and Social History, Kent University (2 programmes: the railway age; the later Victorian age)

Appendix 2 Historians Contributing as Programme Directors on the Long March of Everyman

Raphael Samuel, Tutor in Social History, Ruskin College Oxford (C19th social outsiders)

V G Kiernan, Professor of History, Edinburgh University (the British Empire 1830s-1914)

John A Terraine, free-lance military historian (First World War)

Donald Nicholl, Reader in History, Keele University (working class Britain, 1920s and 1930s)

Asa Briggs, Professor of History and Vice-Chancellor Sussex University (2 programmes: middle class Britain, 1920s and 1930s; Second World War and early 1950s)

Stuart Hall, Acting Director, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham University (1950s and 1960s)

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